

THE BHUBA: A PATERNALLY INHERITED JEWISH PRIESTHOOD IN SOUTHERN AFRICA?

Magdel le Roux

University of South Africa

Abstract

The recently much publicised genetic results of the Lemba placed the Lemba of Southern Africa in the spotlight (Thomas et al 1998; 2000; Soodyall 2010). From DNA samples, taken specifically from the Bhuba, the priestly family of the Lemba, a very close relation has emerged between them (the Bhuba) and those of the Cohanim (priesthood) in Israel and all over the world. Much has been written about the Lemba, but very little about their priestly family, the Bhuba, who show 53% presence of the CMH (Cohen Modal Haplotype). Are there any remnants of the ancient priesthood still to be found among the Bhuba? Scanty information is available about the Bhuba and we therefore need to rely heavily on oral traditions of the Bhuba collected during a recent field study mainly in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces (specifically in the Phusela and Sekwamokgope areas). To my knowledge the oral traditions of specifically the Bhuba have never been recorded in these areas before. Utilising written sources, oral traditions, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, ethnography, musicology, art, botany and other techniques brings respect and maturity to the field of African historiography, which has been at the cutting edge of methodological innovation (Lord 1991). But to use such a diverse methodology has also brought controversy, particularly regarding oral traditions, not to mention genetic results.

1. Introduction

The recently much publicised genetic results of the Lemba put the Lemba¹ of Southern Africa in the spotlight (Thomas et al 1998; 2000; Sooyall 2010). From DNA samples, taken specifically from the Bhuba, the priestly family of the Lemba, a close relation has emerged between them (the Bhuba) and the *Cohanim* (priesthood) in Israel and all over the world.

A study using Y chromosome markers suggested both a Bantu and Semitic² contribution to the Lemba gene pool not inconsistent with Lemba oral tradition (Spurdle & Jenkins 1992; 1996). To provide a more detailed picture of the Lemba paternal genetic heritage, 399 Y chromosomes, six microsatellites and six biallelic markers in six populations were analysed (Lemba, Bantu, Yemeni-Hadramaut, Yemeni-Sena, Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazic Jews; Thomas et al 1998). The high resolution afforded by the markers shows that Lemba Y chromosomes are clearly divided into Semitic and Bantu clades. Interestingly one of the Lemba lineages, the Bhuba, or priestly family, carries, at a very high frequency, a particular Y chromosome type termed the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH) known to be characteristic of the paternally haplotype (signature) of Judaic origin (Thomas et al 1998).

According to the Old Testament, males of the tribe of Levi, of which Moses was a member, were assigned special religious responsibilities (Nu 3; 4), but male descendants of Aaron, his brother, were selected to serve as priests (cohanim) (Thomas et al 1998:138). Therefore, Y chromosomes of present-day Cohanim (priesthood) and Levites should not only be distinguishable from those of other Jews, they should also derive from a common ancestral type no more recently than the Temple Period. Thomas et al (1998:138) show that although Levite chromosomes are diverse, Cohen chromosomes are homogeneous. They contend that despite extensive diversity among Israelites, a single haplotype (CMH) is strikingly frequent in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Cohanim. Furthermore, they trace the origin of Cohen chromosomes to about 3 000 years before present, during or shortly before the Temple Period in Jewish history. Soodyall & Jenkins (2010)

¹ There is no consensus about the origins of the Lemba and no consensus will probably ever be reached. Various authors wrote within their own contexts of time and location, and for this reason it is difficult to align the arguments of all these authors in this article. Neither can a clear link between the various oral traditions be established. It is striking that a considerable number of scholars opt for both a Jewish as well as an Arab source or influence. Many scholars are in agreement that the Lemba constitute a separate or distinct group from the 'Bantu' groups who are their hosts. They are distinguished from others especially by their traditions of origin, customs, traditional religious practices, features, skills and aloofness. And many scholars hold that the Lemba have many customs with a Semitic or an Old Testament resonance (Le Roux 2003).

² Influences of religions such as Judaism and Christianity were operative in Africa, long before that of Islam (before 600 BCE). Indications of much later 'immigrations' of priestly groups from the Semitic world come from the reports of the historian, Josephus, in his 'Jewish Antiquities'.

very recently investigate the possibility that these chromosomes might have been a very late contribution (by a Jewish priest in the 1700s in South Africa) to the gene pool of the Lemba. The only reference that I could find that might add to this theory is in Mathivha's booklet (1992:15) where he refers to their settlement at Mapakombere in 200 BC, but he does not give any particulars to his sources. He only states: 'Histon: The VaDuma people used to reside in Mozambique before migrating into Zimbabwe. Their ancestor was a *white man* who got married to a black woman. They had a son whom they called Saheri who later on joined the other Lembas at Sena under the chiefmanship of Bakari at Bhela. The first born of Saheri was Bwaranganai.'

However, very little has been written about their priestly family, the Bhuba, who showed 53% presence of the CMH. In this investigation a number of questions are addressed: Are any remnants of an ancient priesthood still to be found among the Bhuba? What is their function in the Lemba communities today? Can a comparison between Bhuba traditions and practices and the Old Testament priesthood contribute to the debate about the tradition of origin of the Lemba?

Very sparse information is available and we therefore need to rely heavily on oral traditions of Bhuba families. During a recent field study (2009-2010) in Bhuba communities in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces I utilised qualitative research methods which included participant observation and in-depth interviewing.³ To my knowledge, the oral traditions of specifically the Bhuba and their role as priestly family in the 'Phusela' (Lenyenye) and Senwamokgope (Soekmekaar) areas have never been recorded before⁴ (cf. Mathivha 1992). Unfortunately, this 'living source' is slowly but surely disappearing and the transmission of traditions is kept alive artificially mainly by the annual LCA (Lemba Cultural Association) Conferences.

Most traditions are transmitted by means of songs, prayers, proverbs, praises, recitations, rituals, stories, written documents and numerous other mediums. Songs, recitations, as well as certain prayers, can be described as poems or set speech, which form part of everyday language and which are memorised. Stories and proverbs tend to be transmitted in a less fixed form as spoken prose, whereas praise songs or poems are chanted in various kinds of recitative, employing a semi-musical framework (Vansina 1985:16, 46). Performances often

³ I was invited by Gilbert Selamolela in 2008 to visit their communities in order to record Bhuba oral traditions (more specifically that of the Selamolela family). I am grateful for the hospitality and assistance he and Mr Mphelo provided during my stay.

⁴ In this study, oral traditions which were obtained from the Bhuba by means of recorded performances and interviews, among others, were translated directly by an interpreter (either Mphelo or Selamolela) from the original language (sometimes a mixture of Shona, Kalanga, Venda and Sotho) into English or Afrikaans. As far as possible the precise words of the participants were retained in the transcription. The transcription was also sent to Mphelo and Selamolela to be verified (before publication).

combine words and dance, and thus traditions can be conveyed by means of these performances. One of the striking characteristics of orality, over and against written literature, is its verbal variability. Vansina (1985:16, 46) emphasises that sung messages in particular ensure reliability of transmission, since the 'melody acts as a mnemonic device'.

Methodological innovation has been crucial for African historiography for the last three decades. All available sources such as written sources, oral traditions, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, ethnography, musicology, art, botany and other techniques should be used to bring respect and maturity to the field (Lord 1991). The use of such a diverse methodology has brought controversy as well, particularly regarding oral traditions, not to mention genetic results. Oral cultures such as that of the Bhuba and the early Israelites (as described in the biblical narratives), simply rely much less (mostly not at all) on reading and writing than do modern cultures.

For the purpose of this article I prefer to define 'oral traditions' as those which include all songs, recitations, prayers, sayings, praises, and any historical or cultural statements from the past, transmitted from one generation to another. The term oral tradition, therefore, applies to both the process and its products. Among the various kinds of historical sources, oral traditions occupy a significant place (Niditch 1993:3; 1996).

The dimension of ritual is central to religion and vital for the understanding of world views. The experiential is not only channelled and expressed by oral traditions, but also through ritual, in which the priesthood obviously plays a significant role. Every culture has its rituals and practices such as regular worship, sacrifices (which are believed to convey God's grace) or other patterns of behaviour, which fulfil a function in developing spiritual awareness or ethical insight. 'The ritual dimension serves to restore the image of order when it falls into disarray or becomes clouded' (Niditch 1997:99).

The main objective here is to investigate the history and functions of the Bhuba lineage of the Lemba as preserved in their songs and recitations and how they possibly relate to the early Israelite priesthood.

2. The Old Testament Priesthood

Different versions or parallels of the same narrative often occur on the pages of the Old Testament and should be interpreted as such. Gottwald (1985:94) and others accept that most biblical literature had a complex and deep-seated oral tradition. That is, before anything was written, there were already oral traditions which were transmitted from generation to generation. The question is whether any oral traditions from early Israel were written down in that period or not and this question is obviously related to whether there was a mastery of writing in early Israel or not. Precisely how traditions were transmitted and during which

occasions, is not certain, but we may be able to learn from other existing ‘oral cultures’ how this process may have taken place.⁵

Whereas Numbers characteristically calls the priests ‘the sons of Aaron’ (e.g. 10:8), Deuteronomy frequently uses the expression ‘the Levitical priests’ (e.g. 18:1; Job 1988: 966-971). Though some scholars have held that no distinction is drawn between priests and Levites in Deuteronomy, the fact that different portions are ascribed to priests in Deuteronomy 18:3(ff) and to Levites in 18:6(ff) suggests that the distinction is maintained. The phrase ‘the Levitical priests’ (e.g. Dt 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9; cf. Jos. 3:3; 8:33) seems to mean ‘the priests of the tribe of Levi.’ To them the Deuteronomic code assigns numerous duties in addition to the *care of the sanctuary*:

- they serve as *judges* in cases involving difficult decisions (17:8-9);
- they regulate the *control of lepers* (24:8);
- they *guard the book of the law* (17:18); and
- assist Moses in the ceremony of *covenant renewal* (Job 1988, 966-971).

According to the Biblical tradition, the priests play a more prominent role than the Levites in the book of Joshua (during the *Exodus and settlement period* in the Promised Land), especially in the story of the crossing of Jordan and the conquest of Jericho.

Sometimes called ‘the priests of the Levites’ (e.g. Jos. 3:3; 8:33) and more often simply ‘the priests’ (e.g. Jos. 3:6ff; 4:9), they had the crucial task of *bearing the Ark of the Covenant*. Apparently the carrying of the Ark was entrusted to the Kohathites⁶ priests (cf. Nu 3:21-26, 29-32; 4:15, 21, 40), because of the supreme importance of these journeys. The Ark symbolised the presence of Yahweh, the God of Israel (cf. Le Roux 2009). The distinction between priests and Levites is clearly maintained: the Levites remind Eleazar, the priest, and Joshua of Moses’ command concerning the Levitical cities (Jos. 21:1-3); the Kohathites are divided into two groups – those who have descended from Aaron (i.e. the priests) and the rest (Jos. 21:4-5)⁷.

Lenchak (1996) examines the multiple functions of Israelite priests and their relationship to the politics of their times. He notes that the office was *hereditary, performed by men*, who were persons *set apart* for they were ‘holy’.

⁵ I am not arguing a case for Old Testament traditions and their origin, but I am trying to argue how certain Old Testament traditions could have been made relevant. Also how they could have functioned within the communities of early Israel, in view of what is now learnt from an existing oral culture such as the Bhuba, the priestly family of the Lemba. It is a matter of function over against ‘textualism.’

⁶ The Kohathites was a sub-clan of the tribe of Levi to which both Moses and Aaron belonged.

⁷ The debate regarding the date for the priestly code (Pentateuch) falls outside the parameters of this investigation.

They discerned the will of God by *casting lots, giving oracles, pronounced blessings and judgements, taught and offered sacrifices*.

By assessing, developing, and partly integrating Max Weber's typology of prophets and priests (1922) as well as Mary Douglas's theory of cultural claims which is implicit in arguments about ritualism and anti-ritualism (1973, 1982), Hendel (1995) is convinced that it is possible to understand the differences between the priestly and prophetic views of ritual in the Old Testament. He emphasises that the Israelite and Judaeen priests belonged to a *high group/high status social context*, which is conducive to strong *ritualism*. In the priestly cosmology, the ritual and the ethical complement and require each other for the cosmos to function properly.

3. Bhuba, the Priestly Family of the Lemba

3.1 From Promised Land to Africa

'The Bhuba lineage came down from Judea as the leading lineage of the Basena when they left Judea in their earlier migration to the Yemen where they settled and built the city of Sena. They ruled over all the lineages in good manner with the result that they are called by the name of Basena [the people of Sena] or Baphusela [the people of Phusela]. They were the rulers of the two cities [Sena and Phusela] in the Yemen' (Mathivha 1992: 23; my insertion). They believe that they are the 'chosen people' with a religion which stems from Abraham and hold that they came from a city called Sena. According to Mathivha, a special name of praise for Bhuba (and all the other lineages) is *shvhanani*, a word derived from the old Jewish *shabi* which means 'the giver of Abraham's faith' (D:R:1-5). Experts among the Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia aver, according to Mathivha (1992; 1997), that 'Bhuba' is an aberration of the name 'Judah'. DNA results, specifically involving the Bhuba, that only became known in 1998 and 1999, confirmed a *hereditary Jewish priestly ancestor*. The Lemba already had these traditions about the priestly clan long before the genetic tests had been done, which tests show their links with the Jewish priests elsewhere.

According to their tradition they left Sena, crossed the 'Phusela' and came by boat to Africa (Wangemann 1868). Mathivha (1992:9) notes that it was Hamisi who later followed the Bhuba in ruling the city of Sena and who sent out his trade boats across the sea into Africa.

Parfitt (1997:336) found a city called Sena in the eastern Hadramaut (in Yemen), situated on the trade route from the sea to Tarim. The valley that leads from Sena in the eastern Hadramaut 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 Lemba oral tradition⁸. Interestingly, the word *masila* appears in the same tradition (recorded by Wangemann in 1868), but in another context, where it

⁸ 'M' and 'P' are interchangeable in most African languages.

refers to the fabricated clothes (long white dresses) worn by the Lemba. It is possible that the place where they came from and the clothes they used to wear (and were they got them from) became so closely associated with each other that they (or the other people) started to refer to their clothes as *masila*.

It was only the men under the leadership of Hamisi⁹ who came to Africa as traders, erecting trading posts on the east coast of Africa (Le Roux 1999). Then, a war broke out in their country of origin and they were unable to return.¹⁰ They were now forced to take wives from the local people, the *vhazendzhi* (the heathens). In Africa they rebuilt Sena twice, the last time on the Zambezi in Mozambique (in the valley of the great rivers) and helped to construct a great stone city which they identify as Great Zimbabwe (Le Roux 2003).

Selamolela (2009) and Mphelo (2009) recall the journey of the Lemba (as found in many praise songs and recitations) from the original Sena in the north. The chronology and dating¹¹ is not clear at all but that is how they remember it. It has been recited in numerous ways and transferred from generation to generation: *Sena I – they can't recall where it was; Sena II – Sena I was rebuilt somewhere in Tanzania, Kenia or Uganda; Sena III – they again rebuilt the city of Sena, this time on the Zambezi, in modern-day Mozambique; Mashenzere – in Mozambique; Chiramba – in Wedza district, Zimbabwe; Gokomere – East of Harare; Shavhani/Shabani – in Southern Zimbabwe; Belengwa (Mbelengwa) – Southern Zimbabwe; Buhwa – South of Mbelengwa; Mapungubwe – on the Limpopo, South Africa; Dzata – in the Soutpansberg area (Njelele Valley); Matsekangope – Giyani (modern-day Limpopo); Luvhimbi – in the former Venda, close to Makonde; Tshivase – close to Donald Fraser Hospital (former Venda); Chakuma – in Levhubu; Leode – east of Louis Trichardt; Elim – south of Louis Trichardt; Phusela – modern-day Lenyenyene (close to Tzaneen); Sekgopo – Moeketsi; Mamaila – close to Soekmekaar (Sekgosese)* (cf. Connaway 1978:38).

3.1.1 Carriers of the *ngoma lungundu* – an ‘African Ark of the Covenant’

The special task of the Bhuba on their journey into Africa was to carry the *ngoma lungundu*’ (meaning – the drum that thunders; Selamolela 2009; cf. Mathivha 1992; Le Roux 2009).

⁹ ‘Hamisi later established a city at Gokomere which made Hamisi to be praised by ‘Hamisi-amiseve vagokomere-vachikomochimwe’ Vhapusela vazungu vanokubva Sena’ (Mathivha 1992:14).

¹⁰ Mostly Arabs and Ethiopians of the Islamic faith started to invade Sena. Some of the citizens of Sena went back to Judea while Hamisi and the remaining Basena crossed the sea into Africa following their trade routes’ (Mathivha 1992:9).

¹¹ Henige (1974: 1,2) states that the historian who asks for answers to chronological questions from oral traditions is in most cases seeking information that these sources were never designed to provide.

Already in *circa* 1150, Al-Idrisi, the Arab geographer, observed that the people of the *ngoma lungundu* were forced from their territory on the east coast of Africa and down into the Sena area at the Zambezi (cited in Mullan 1969:73-76). This special drum was carried by the priestly family of the Lemba, the Bhuba. He further records that the inhabitants of al-Banyes, worship this drum, called Arrahim¹² which makes a terrible noise when smitten and which can be heard about three miles away. Von Sicard (1943; 1952) was possibly the first scholar to draw parallels between the Ark of the Covenant and the *ngoma lungundu*. He is convinced that they literally carried, as an *elite, priestly group*, the concept of the Ark of the Covenant and concomitant related Semitic customs southwards into Africa.

The Ark, like the *ngoma*, had supernatural powers – both were symbols of divine presence; it was never allowed to touch ground or be touched improperly; it was carried into battle as a weapon and a guarantor of victory; sacred objects were kept inside; a priestly caste guarded and carried these objects (*ngoma* and Ark). Like the Ark, the *ngoma* showed them the direction to go and gave the signal for where to camp and for breaking camp (cf. Le Roux 2009).

3.1.2 Led by a star

According to tradition, they were led by a star from the original Sena to the South (Mathivha 1992; Selamolela 2008 and many others). ‘The star moved immediately after midnight and when it falls away behind a mountain they had to reach that point [there they found natural fruits and water with fish]. They then settled there until the star again guided them. Because they trespassed the laws of God (Mwari, the God of Heaven) He punished them: they had to move away from Sena and when you return your sins will be forgiven. They don’t know where Sena is.’ Selamolela confirms that he is the 7th generation since they left Sena on the Zambezi (Selamolela 2008).

Presently, the Balemba, or Lemba, live among other peoples mainly in the Limpopo Province and Mpumalanga (in South Africa); Mozambique and the southern parts of Zimbabwe (Vharemba). The greatest concentration of the Bhuba clan can be found in India Village, in Sekhukhuneland and in the vicinity of Phusela (Lenyenye). They seem to be blending in with the groups surrounding them, attending local schools, but keeping themselves separate and distinct from others by means of their kosher laws, customs and skills and through their traditions of origin and Semitic features.

The Lemba used to have chiefs for all the Lemba lineages, but now they only have three or four left: Malaka (Bhuba, Sekhukhuneland); Tloubatla (Hadzhi, Sinthumele, kutuma [west of Louis Trichardt]); Mpaketsane (Mhani,

¹² As ‘l’ and ‘r’ are interchangeable in many African languages it is possible that what he actually heard was Errahim – a corruption for the word Elohim – the Hebrew word for God (Parfitt 2008:227).

Sekhukhune); Mposi (Sadiki, Satekge, Mberengwa, Zimbabwe (Selamolela 2009; Mphelo 2009).

The totem of the Lemba is the elephant. 'Our skills and knowledge were to be compared with the largest animal of which the elephant was chosen. It symbolises superiority' (Selamolela, M 2009). In their world-view they are of a *high social standing*.

The Bhuba have nine different family names and those families are spread all over Mpumalanga Province, Limpopo Province and southern Zimbabwe: Malaka¹³; Selamolela¹⁴; Mphelo; Phala; Tshikalange; Padipadi (Balibali); Ramapela(Ramambila); Machoga; Sengane.

The Bhuba chiefs were independent and were never subject to other chiefs. They always gave advice to other chiefs, helped them built their villages and even *judge* during the absence of other chiefs on their behalf. The Bhuba never asked assistance of other chiefs. The reason was that they had many skills. They could do things rapidly! The Bhuba also had the skill to make bangles and pots' (Selamolela 2009).

3.2 Bhuba Traditions of Origin and Skill

Much can be derived from the songs, recitations and prayers of an oral culture and many different devices are used to capture and recall their history. Praise songs are just one of them. They could be described as set speech, which form part of everyday language and which are memorised (Vansina 1985:16, 46).

'Every Lemba lineage has its own praise-song. The Bhuba praise song is: *Bhuba we shaba Bhuba na Basikana Muzungu a no ku bva Sena* (Translation: 'Bhuba, white man who came from Sena in origin'; Selamolela 2008).

A praise song which further elaborates on their tradition of origin and skill is: '*Bhuba we Shabane a no ku bva Sena. Mushavhi a no shava ngombe Muzungu a sa shavi mbudzi rikwembe*' or '*Bhuba we shaba Bhuba na Basikana Mushavhi a no shava ngombe a sa shavhi Mbudzi lukwembe Muzungu a no ku bva Sena*' (Translation: 'Bhuba from Shabane in Sena, white Mushavhi [traders] do not buy a goat, but a cow'; Selamolela 2008). The interpretation is that the Bhuba came from

¹³ 'The Bhuba man Seasa, was responsible for giving the breeding of Malaka (Bhuba lineage in South Africa). He married 10 wives and each one of them had 11 kids (they only counted the sons). The Malaka chief used to be very strong, fearful and rigid. One could not look at him without getting tears in your eyes and without getting a white substance in your eyes' (Selamolela 2008).

¹⁴ The Selamolela were earlier known as the Malaka, but since they helped the Matabele, they were given the name Selamolela by the Matabele, meaning 'to help somebody' (Mphelo 2009). '*Ke rena ba Selamolela Matebele batho Hlwele ba enwa kae kgomi di enwa Moseneke, "Selamolela wee!"*' Meaning: 'We the Selamolela family who helped Matabele tribe. We gave water to their cattle somewhere in Moseneke River where they used to drink' (Selamolela, J 2009). This River is south of the Limpopo.

a place called Shabane in Zimbabwe and before that from a place called Sena and they do not buy goats, but rather cows.

This song not only refers to Shabane and Sena, but remarkably also to the word saba, shaba or shavhi which is derived from Saba or Sheba (pre-Islamic Arabia). Shaba or Saba means ‘to trade’ or ‘trader’ in Arabic and until this day the Lemba refer to each other as Mushavi/Mshabi (trader). One of the Provinces in Mozambique was called Shaba and a River in the same country is called Shavi/Sabi (Le Roux [2010]). In my opinion the use of shaba or shavi which most probably refer to the place Saba where they came from, became as in the case of *Masilah* and *masila* (their clothes) so closely related to each other that it also became the name of the people (Mushabi/Mushavhi referring not only to their place of origin but also to their skills (cf. Van Warmelo 1935:122)).¹⁵

Another praise song is: ‘*Mulemba wa shavha, Bhuba wa shaba ano kuwa Sena. Mshavhi wee! Mulemba ano baza nyondo Kalanga Bhuba wee!*’ Interpretation: The Lemba Bhuba who moved as the first lineage from the place called Sena. They were indeed real Mushavi (traders) since they were without fear. The Lemba clan fought to rescue crisis in the Kalanga region [presently called Zimbabwe] and has established roots over the area as a real Bhuba-Lemba’ (Selamolela 2009). This could be a very old praise song since it refers to the Bhuba as the first lineage that led the Lemba from Judea to Sena and it contains the way the Bhuba/Lemba managed to get wives from the local people (in Africa). The meaning of the word *nyondo* is not clear and is most probably a remainder of a Shona or Kalanga word (Mphelo 2009).¹⁶ ‘They had no fear since they were not warriors, but traders, selling all kinds of things (especially pottery). They established their trade, the business grew and they were able to make a living out of it. In this way the Lemba modified the drought and hunger and managed to bring an end to it amongst the Kalanga¹⁷ people, but the Lemba were not Kalanga. Later the Kalanga rewarded them with grown-up girls (wives). This arrangement with the Kalanga changed their traditional way of marriage’ (endogamy; Selamolela 2009).

¹⁵ The oldest recorded song I could find also reflects on the trading skills of the Lemba (specifically linked to the trading of cows). It was written down by the Portuguese Father Fernandes in 1561/1562 (in Von Sicard 1962: 68-80; cf. Stayt 1931:238; Le Roux 2000):

Gome zuco virato

Ambuze capana virato

(The cow has leather for shoes,
And the goat has no leather for shoes).

The implication is that this tradition, which is still transferred from generation to generation and which emphasises their preference for cows instead of goats, is at least 500 years old.

¹⁶ According to Mphelo ‘Nyaoda is a mountain of Bhuba people.’

¹⁷ A Seremani praise-song also refers to their relationship with the Kalanga : ‘Malema chipi ya Bokgalaka’, meaning ‘the iron of Bokgalaka, that is ‘ they made iron when they lived among the Karanga.’

The Bhuba might have rescued the Kalanga from poverty, but according to their tradition they have lost much more in the process and have impoverished themselves culturally. Usually the Bhuba only married within the Sadiki and Hamisi lineages. In this way the Bhuba 'established their roots: they manage to get acknowledgement from the Kalanga as a group on their own and settled there' (Selamolela 2009).

The Kalanga chiefs always wanted a Bhuba close to them, since they were good *judges*. Selamolela's grandfather would judge in the absence of the Pedi chief to whom he was an advisor (Selamolela 2009).

'A saying which confirms that something is true is: *Bhuba wa shava nga vhasikana, nyaoda nga vhathannga*, meaning we are the Bhuba girls living together with the Bhuba boys as one family. 'When you use this phrase it is accepted as the truth' (Mphelo, M 2009 and Selamolela, J 2009).

3.3 Offering Sacrifices

Mathivha (1997, D:R:1-5) says 'they were actually the leaders of the Sena group who were the carriers of trade between Yemen and Judea'. Furthermore, 'the Bhuba (Judah) were responsible for the so called "secret *sacrifices*" which had to be brought. In fact, there is a proverb that specifically refers to these responsibilities of the Bhuba, namely: *Bhuba malinga lu tanga*, which means: Bhuba, the one who keeps that kind of seed/crops (*tanga*). The seeds of this special kind of crop were used for the sacrificial ceremonies, one can still find these crops in Zimbabwe today,' Mathivha remarks. 'The Bhuba were therefore, according to this tradition, the priests among the Lemba clans. The headquarters of the Bhuba family in South Africa was Phusela (Lenyenye),¹⁸ close to Tzaneen¹⁹, but moved from there to India village in Sekhukhuneland.' But Ba-Phusela, referring to the people of Phusela is where Lenyenye is today. The first lineage to arrive at Phusela from Mapungubwe was Bhuba.

3.4 The Loss of their Special Way with God

Selamolela (2008) is convinced that they did not only lose their traditional way of marriage (endogamy) when they 'rescued' the Kalanga, but 'the Bhuba also lost the special way they had with God as the priestly family (in Zimbabwe). Their intermarriage with the Kalanga people changed their relationship with God, because they then started to pray to ancestors. They also lost their ability to see and follow the star.' The narrative of the star played a major role in their history

¹⁸ This name is still reflected in the name of the primary and secondary schools as well as the spruit in Lenyenye today.

¹⁹ According to Selamolela's grandfather, the white people misheard the correct pronunciation for the word 'Tshane' and so gave their own interpretation 'Tzaneen' as the name of the town. Tshane referred to the place where they got the green reeds in the river that was used by the Bhuba to make baskets and mats for use during harvesting.

and still today to a limited group of Lemba. The tradition holds that they crossed the Limpopo on their own (without God) and settled at Mapungubwe, in a dry, hot area.²⁰ ‘They stayed for a short time at Mapungubwe and then they scattered in all directions without following the star. Most of them went to the Thohoyandou area and settled there. It was an individual move – God was not with them anymore’ (Selamolela 2008).

Selamolela’s late grandfather (Raseapa Phetola [Jack] Selamolela Bhuba) was his most important source of information. He told him in the 1970s ‘that they were the first people to settle at Mapungubwe’.²¹

Selamolela (2008) confirms that they ‘believe in the God of the Bible as they are the generation of God – the chosen people of God. Earlier the Bhuba used to pray for whatever they wanted to do. It was the source for everything they wanted to do. In each family there used to be a prayer – in the morning and when the sun goes down. There use to be a specific prayer for each family. The *deza* (the [African; my insertion] cultural way of prayer; instrumental playing and dancing) replaced the original prayer of the Lemba. *Deza* is not part of the original heritage of the Lemba. Instead of praying they are now playing *deza*. *Deza* is connected to the ancestors, it evokes the ancestors and it is linked to what they have learnt from the Kalanga. In this way the Lemba turned away from their original believe. He adds that during the 80’s the Lemba started to link *deza* with Christianity. We even see them in many Christian churches today. Very few Lemba²² are left with the original way of praying.’

In Selamolela’s (2008) opinion ‘it’s better for us to follow Judaism - it’s better than practicing *deza*. I mean, Judaism, culturally based not the religion. It doesn’t necessarily mean we need to abandon Christianity.’ To him the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is the solution. ‘They are promoting Christianity by using

²⁰ Agriculture was very difficult at Mapungubwe and they had to rely only on natural vegetation such as *machidi* fruits (tree) and others. Those trees are also found in the Moeketsi area. They use to mix fresh goats milk with the sour juice (when it is still green) inside the fruit to make a kind of a yogurt.

²¹ ‘After them came a few Arab traders, with whom they traded gold for iron, and then came other tribes. Mapungubwe served as the exit point from Zimbabwe [of all people as they crossed the Limpopo] to move southwards and to the coastal region. Most of the tribes buried their people there, including their chiefs [that’s why so many different groups of people are found there]. According to their tradition the tribes of Chief Machelche’s Kingdom (from the Batlokwa tribe in Botswana) were the last to exit Mapungubwe.’ To my knowledge they are the only Lemba group with information regarding Mapungubwe in their oral traditions and Mathivha (1992) is the only other author who refers to Mapungubwe in connection with the Lemba (cf. Le Roux 1999). It is also important to note that Selamolela got this information from his grandfather thirty years before the importance of Mapungubwe and the reburial of the bones from Mapungubwe which were stored at the University of Pretoria became headlines (2008).

²² Selamolela (2010) says that there might still be two old women close to Matoks who might still know those original prayers of the Bhuba. He will investigate the possibility.

Jesus Christ as a tool for example of the faith of God. Their leader, Bishop Lekganyane [not sure whether he is a Lemba or not, but the secretary general and other people close to him are usually Bhuba; my insertion] represents the power of God. He wants his followers to be guided by the Ten Commandments. His prophecies predict the future. He teaches that if you trespass this you will be punished. There are consequences for your wrong deeds. One should pray continuously and request forgiveness.²³ The use of tea leaves in the ZCC is different from the African traditional way. These leaves are good for your health and heal sicknesses if you are a believer. In African tradition they use roots and the outside layer of the stem which a person drinks unlimited.

At the ZCC there are no ancestral activities allowed. Their real ancestors are actually Abraham, Jacob and Isaac. A man with the name of Engenas started the ZCC in 1910' (Selamolela 2008). The history of the ZCC is closely linked to a special star and the tradition of the Lemba people. 'From a mountain in Lesotho Engenas was called and guided by God to search for the star and the symbol of the tracks of cows²⁴ on the "Holy Mount Zion"²⁵ – similar to the mountain of miracles in the Bible. He was promised that many miracles will happen there.' The Lemba tradition holds that they 'lost the star in Zimbabwe (Mberengwa): from where the star moved straight and fell down at the present Moriah (not far from Polokwane; Limpopo Province, RSA). The stones were very hot and the tracks of the four heels of cows²⁶ were found by Engenas (printed in the hot, melted stone) and it is still visible today. The stones were dusty and hot like volcanic lava.' This event is also confirmed by farmers who lived in the vicinity (according to them it happened in 1946).

'When it fell there the Reverend Engenas was behind it at Podungwane not far from there. He was directed from there to the real place. He had to show that his place was holy therefore he started to wear a hat. When he wanted to pray he removed his hat from his head. He was told that this is the place where you have to worship and to heal the sick. That is where the prayers are taking place. The church is built where the star has fallen down.' Selamolela says an old priest told them about this story. The story was prophesized to them and was recorded in a booklet, called the 'Messenger' (2008; cf. Mpaketsane 1996)

'His successors were Edward and after him, Barnabas. Lekganyane is the grand grandson of this man, who followed the star from Lesotho to Moriah. The name "Lekganyane", means "the shining star." His real name is Ramarumo

²³ 'The use of tea leaves in the ZCC is different from the African traditional way. These leaves are good for your health and heal sicknesses if you are a believer. In African tradition they use roots and the outside layer of the stem which a person drinks unlimited' (Selamolela 2008).

²⁴ Which used to be the totem of his tribe in Lesotho.

²⁵ At that stage Chief Mamabolo lived there.

²⁶ Is there any significance in the fact that this tradition of the star is linked with the symbol of a cow?

Barnabas.’ Whether Lekganyane is a Lemba, he is not sure. ‘His son, Engenas Thota Maroba will soon replace him.’

It is usually a Lemba who would occupy the highest positions in the ZCC (secretary general and other positions closest to Lekganyane). The first secretary general of this church was a Lemba, from the lineage of Thovakali. The Mathivha family was the second. Other secretary generals do not last. If they trespass Lekganyane throws them out’ (Selamolela 2009).

3.5 Prophetic Skills

‘The only Bhuba family with prophetic skills is the lineage of Selamolela. They have plenty traditional doctors, but they do not throw bones [as the custom is in African tradition]. They just prophesy and get their medicine from nature’ (roots etc; Selamolela 2009).

Gilbert Selamolela’s grandfather ‘was a traditional doctor and had many extraordinary skills. He remembers that his grandfather once planted maize and beans and sugar-cane. He could create snakes to protect the fields. People could not steal his crops. One day on the second hectare he planted corn. When ready to be harvested he ordered falcons to chase away the other birds not to eat his harvest. When we saw it, we went to him, but he did not explain’ (Selamolela 2009). ‘Once we did not look after the cows properly and when we wanted to steal fresh milk from the clay pots, a snake chased us away. One day grandfather explained that he can chase away many things. He said it was magic, not witchcraft! Things would just disappear while you are looking at them. He could call a cow by the name and he would rope it alone. This was due to their priestly function. But most Bhuba who had these skills died. From 1990 to date I could not find anyone who could do the same’ (Selamolela 2009).

This lineage could marry more than one wife (4-8) and most of them were prophets (Selamolela 2009). They could prophesy without bones. Just a few still have this gift of prophesying today. If a child is named after an ancestor who had a high profile of prophesy, he or she would have some ability of prophecy. Usually intervention through the ancestors takes place. When he (seldom a woman) prophesies his skill will turn wet (sweating). He/she does not perform a specific ritual to be able to prophesy. He/she could prophesy when he sees you on the spot.’

Selamolela’s (2009) grandfather told him that he would become his first grandson to be educated (he was in St 5 and 11 years old then). He admitted that it might have become a self-fulfilled prophecy. His grandfather could also predict the rainfall: at the first sound of the thunder clouds they had to drive the cattle home. He was always proved right with his predictions.

3.6 Circumcision & Funeral Rites

The Bhuba are involved in numerous ritual activities. They are the core organisers of the circumcision ceremony for all Lemba. According to Selamolela (2008) it

started among the Kalanga, who copied it later on. The first people to whom they introduced circumcision were the Kalanga. Apparently most of the Bhuba praise songs are being sung during the main rituals such as the circumcision and at burials.

‘Only Bhuba perform circumcision in all initiation schools. The reason is that they were the first lineage of the Lemba who started the movement from the original Sena. God (Mwali waxango /Ngoali we denga [Northern Sotho]; God Almighty is “ever-lasting and ever shining”, or “the heavenly God”; Mwari wa denga is the same) gave them skills to make them firm. Their God is different from the God of Africa. He is the same as the God of the Bible’ (Selamolela 2008).

About the circumcision Mphelo reports that it is done mainly for hygienic reasons. He admits that he has read somewhere that the circumcision is a *sign of the covenant with God*. The circumcision ceremony in their vicinity used to take place on the right side of ‘Mathivha-kop’ (Mathivha Hill) on the Giyani road.

The purpose of circumcision is according to Selamolela (2009) ‘the way to make men out of the boys. It is an initiation from boyhood to adulthood and to teach the boys good manners: How to behave in a family, how to behave amongst men and in *lekgothla* (gathering of the older Lemba people). They learn about family secrets, sexual matters, fertility and good behaviour in general in society. For example if you steal your mother will die (and you don’t want to lose her). If you shout at home too much you will be ‘bewitched’²⁷ until you surrender. You learn the behaviour of adulthood. At 25 you are a man. If you are not circumcised you are not an adult yet.²⁸

During a Lemba funeral (*chaisa seroba*) water is poured into the grave (*Ga Mamaila Mmonatšohle*) to symbolise their journey to Africa across the ocean. They also throw mealies into the grave with the deceased (Mphelo 2008). A special praise song called the *ndinde* is sung at the funeral: *Mushavi a no shava ngombe a sa shavi mbunzi rikwembe* (literally: ‘Lemba men buy cows and not goats’). This means that the deceased is being praised for the good work he did during his lifetime.²⁹

²⁷ It was just a word used to threaten the youngsters.

²⁸ In the olden days it used to be free (they only needed to give a reward to the chief) – all boys aged 17 were bound to be circumcised. Today if you stay in the district and even if you are a Bhuba you need to pay R400 to the local chief to go to initiation school. And other people, who do not reside there, pay R800. Since 1982 the chief (non-Lemba) started to gain from the situation.’

²⁹ According to Mphelo, another praise song that is sung during this event is: *Ku lobola ku no vhulaisa* (literally: ‘to marry many wives leads to death’). This song contains a warning to all men present at the funeral: to marry many wives is not right. The problem occurs when you die – who will inherit your cows when you die? Many wives will fight about the inheritance. When there is only one wife there is no problem, but more than one creates major problems especially when you die. Many wives have its advantages as one needs many people to work in the fields,

3.7 Rearing and Herding of Cattle

One of the special skills of the Bhuba (Selamolela family) is to rear and herd cattle as reflected and emphasised in most of their praise-songs. It is told that when 'they are in the field with their livestock they only need to touch certain trees as they walk and the animals will follow the herdsman' and 'he could even send the animals back along the same route' (Selamolela 2008). This was especially true of the Bhuba chief in the Soekmekaar area. When he 'called the animals they would come quickly', but when the old man died the animals did not respond to the others in the same way. Today the Bhuba still make good guards, watchmen, soldiers and police (Mphelo 2009; Selamolela 2009).

The Selamolela family come from Malaka in Sekhukhuneland. The Bhuba chief, Chief Malaka of Sekhukhuneland will always choose another Bhuba to guard him (Selamolela 2009).³⁰

4. Conclusion

The Bhuba praise song must be very old since it refers to the Bhuba as the oldest lineage who led the Lemba into Yemen and it describes the way the Bhuba/Lemba managed to get wives from the local people. The praise-songs do not only refer to Sena, Phusela and Shabane, but remarkably also to Mapungubwe. 'Saba' means

but the problems start when you die!' (2008). My question is: What about the priestly family who may marry many wives?

³⁰ *Other practices and characteristics. Storage practices:* Elephants played an important role in the lives of the Bhuba (and the rest of the Lemba community, being their totem). 'When an elephant is ill, they were able to finish its life'. They 'used an arrow and threw it behind the head. They used the legs as symbol of their totem.' 'They dug holes in the ground and put the legs into the hole. It was sealed and covered with the skin of the animal. They filled it with their jewellery and other valuables' (Selamolela 2008). During 'harvest time (autumn) they made bigger holes "sesiu/seshego", storerooms for storing purposes' (Selamolela 2008). They dry the food and then store the food in these bigger holes. The holes are laid out with maize leaves and the opening is covered up with a big stone (I have seen some of those not far from Mathivha Hill). The Bhuba also 'make big pots' (*Motšhea*), about one meter high, two or three for a bigger family, which are put in the ground with just the rim outside. When it is very hot in summer, the water inside this pot is nice and cold. The moisture of the soil keeps it cool. When the water in the pot is getting less, only an elder person should fetch water for you. It is usually covered with a spoud (mud) for avoiding a child to fall in (Selamolela 2008). *Pottery making:* 'The Lemba tradition of making and selling pots continued, even as far as Musina. All the Lemba clans were there. No mining was going on there. They stayed for a very short period there (seven to ten years maybe)' (Selamolela 2009; cf. Van Warmelo 1935). The Bhuba are known for their skill at pottery making and especially the decoration of pots. We visited a lady in Mashamba who showed us the steps in making and decorating a huge variety of pots. Copper ingots are still found all over the Mpumalanga and Limpopo Provinces, mainly in Lemba villages. It was used to make copper bangles. They smelt the iron into pieces which were then used to wrap up the pieces into bangles (Mphelo, M 2009).

trader in Arabic and until this day the Lemba refer to each other as Mushavi/Mshabi (trader) and it occurs in more than one way in the songs and traditions. I am convinced that the use of words such as masila, phusela, shaba and shabani, which occur in most of their oral traditions, indicates that the association between the central elements of the Lemba identity and origin is so strong, that the places of origin are being used for other important elements in their culture.³¹ The themes of trading, cows, a star and being white people turn up in almost every song or tradition.

Most of the Bhuba praise songs are sung during circumcision and funeral rites of all Lemba groups, because of their senior position in Lemba history.

It is not sure whether they are ancient or recent, but the similarities between the functions of the various groups (Lemba and proto-Israelites) are remarkable. It could simply be a coincidence, or it could even be a late influence in their culture. The Bhuba (especially in Zimbabwe), like the Israelite priesthood linked the *circumcision* with the Covenant with God. Both are from a *high status social context*, a male *hereditary priestly* office. Like the early Israelite priests, the Bhuba *cast lots* (in a unique non-African way), are responsible for offering *sacrifices*, pronounced *prophetic blessings* and are involved in the *judgement* of cases to solve problems; they were also responsible for *bearing an Ark-like object* which had supernatural powers and which were symbols of divine presence and which showed them the direction to go on their different journeys. Both groups played a major role in their 'exoduses' to or from the 'Promised Land'.

Many of the Bhuba's supposed functions, heritage and religio-cultural practices are preserved and reflected in their oral traditions, especially through songs, recitations and praises. We have to conclude that influence from the Jewish or Israelite religion found the strongest expression in the Lemba culture, probably through their historical connection (although it is not clear when or where) with Jewry or Israelites, and even through Christianity. Whether the Lemba/Bhuba had merely assimilated the similarities between themselves and Jews/Israelites or Christians in their reflections on their own religious heritage is impossible to say. It seems, however, that their self-identification, mainly through their songs, recitations and praises, both conceals and evidences a much older and very complicated religious identity. Although some traditions are very vague, they still provide more information than any written sources. The genetic results are not inconsistent with Lemba oral tradition. Lemba traditions make them special and extremely interesting to study from the point of view of oral cultures.

³¹ The same happened to the use of the word *ngoma* (Le Roux 1997).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Connaway, H P 1978. Herkoms, geskiedenis en genealogie van die Lembasibbes in Venda. *SATE I* (2), 31-44.
- Gottwald, N K 1985. *The Hebrew Bible – a socio-literary introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Job, J B 1988. s.v. 'Israelite priests', in Douglas, J D (ed) 1988. *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed, 966-968. Leicester: Intervarsity Press.
- Hendel, R S 1995. Prophets, priests and the efficacy of ritual, in Wright, D P, Freedman, D N & Milgrom, J (eds) 1995. *Pomegranates and golden bells: studies in biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern ritual, law, and litera*, 185-198. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Lenchak, T A 1996. Israel's priesthood. *Bible Today* 34, 89-93.
- Le Roux, M 1997. African Jews for Jesus. A preliminary investigation into the Semitic origins and missionary initiatives of some Lemba communities in southern Africa. *Missionalia* 25 (4), 493-510.
- Le Roux, M 1999. In search of the understanding of the Old Testament: the case of the Lemba. Unpublished DLit et Phil, Unisa.
- Le Roux, M 2000. Transmission of tradition through song, recitation and prayer in Lemba communities. *Exchange: Journal for missiological and ecumenical research* 29 (4), 331-352.
- Le Roux, M 2003. In search of the origins of the merchants of Sena. *Religion & Theology* 10 (1), 24-50.
- Le Roux, M 2008. Ancient Near Eastern Influence in sub-Saharan Africa. *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 90 N.S. 19, 1-20.
- Le Roux, M 2009. Ngoma lungundu: An African Ark of the Covenant. *OTE* 22 (1), 102-125.
- Le Roux, M [2010]. Pre-Islamic Arabic trade and religion on the East Coast of Africa. *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*
- Lord, A B 1991. *Epic singers and oral tradition*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Mathivha, M E R 1992. *The Basena/Vamwenye/Balemba*. Morester: The Author.
- Mullan, J E 1969. *The Arab builders of Zimbabwe*. Umtali: Rhodesia Mission.
- Niditch, S 1993. *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Niditch, S 1996. *Oral world and written word. Ancient Israelite literature*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Parfitt, T 1997. *Journey to the vanished city. The search for a lost tribe of Israel*. Second edition. London: Phoenix.
- Spurdle, A & Jenkins, T 1992. Y chromosome probe p49a detects complex PvuII haplotypes and many new TaqI haplotypes in southern African populations. *Am J Hum Genet* 50, 107-125.

- Spurdle, A B & Jenkins, T 1996. The origins of the Lemba, 'Black Jews' of southern Africa: evidence from p12F2 and other y-chromosome markers. *Am J Hum Genet* 59, 1126-1133.
- Stayt, H A 1931. Notes on the Balemba (An Arabic-Bantu tribe living among the BaVenda and other Bantu tribes in the Northern Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia). *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 26, 231-238.
- Thomas, M G; Skorecki, K; Ben-Amit, H; Parfitt, T; Bradman, N & Goldstein, D B 1998. Origins of Old Testament priests. *Nature* 394, 138-139.
- Thomas, M G; Parfitt, T; Weiss, D A; Skorecki, K; Le Roux, M; Bradman, N & Goldstein D B 2000. Y chromosomes travelling south: The Cohen Modal Haplotype and the origins of the Lemba – the 'Black Jews of southern Africa'. Submitted and accepted for publication in *AmJHumGenet* 66 (2), 674-686.
- Vansina, J 1985. *Oral traditions as history*. London: James Currey.
- Van Warmelo, N J (ed) 1935. A preliminary survey of the Bantu tribes of South Africa. *Ethnological Publications* 5. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Von Sicard, H 1943. *Karangafolkets äldsta Missionshistoria*. Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans.
- Von Sicard, H 1952. *Ngoma lungundu. Eine afrikanische Bundeslade*. Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia V. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktrycker.
- Von Sicard, H 1962. Lemba clans. *NADA* 39, 68-80.

Interviews conducted

- Mathedimosa (Hamisi), N 2009. Private communication. Senwamokgope (Soekmekaar), Limpopo, RSA.
- Mathivha, M 1994 & 1998. Private communication. Retired professor, Shayandima, Limpopo, RSA.
- Mathivha, M 1997. (D:R) October 1997. Prof Mathivha, Shayandima, Limpopo, RSA.
- Mpaketsane, J 1997. (D:K) April 1997. John Mpaketsane, India, Sekhukhuneland, Limpopo, RSA.
- Mphelo (Bhuba), Enoch William Matjone 2009. Private communication, Sekgosese district, Mamaila, Limpopo, RSA.
- Mpelo (Bhuba), Mmini 2009. Private communication. Sekgosese, Mamaila, Limpopo, RSA.
- Selamolela (Bhuba), Jabudi 2009. Private communication. Sekgosese, Senwamokgope, Limpopo, RSA.
- Selamolela (Bhuba), Mohale Gilbert 2008. Private communication. Pretoria, RSA.
- Selamolela (Bhuba), Mohale Gilbert 2009. Private communication. Sekgosese, Senwamokgope, Limpopo, RSA.
- Soodhall, H & Jenkins, T 2010. Private communication. Pretoria. RSA.