



# The Lemba

A Lost Tribe of Israel in  
Southern Africa?

Magdel le Roux

# The Lemba

A Lost Tribe of Israel in  
Southern Africa?

To my family and friends, to the Lemba people  
and to the memory of the honourable  
Prof M E R Mathivha

---

**‘WE CAME BY BOAT TO AFRICA...’ (A LEMBA TRADITION)**

*‘Solomon sent his ships to get gold from Ophir..  
Some of the Jews who went on those boats stayed in Africa.  
That is the origin of the Lemba’*

# CONTENTS

PREFACE

CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

The structure of the book

## CHAPTER TWO

Some ways in which the

Old Testament is relevant to Africa

Introduction

Overview

Conclusion

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

The Old Testament

## CHAPTER THREE

Conflicting accounts of the people's past: a critical examination of

Scientific history and arrival of the Lemba

Introduction

African history, archaeology and other sciences

The history and origins of the Lemba

Scientific history: a critical examination

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

Conclusion: a critical examination

Conclusion: a critical examination

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

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Conclusion: a critical examination of the scientific history

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Magdel le Roux

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First edition, first impression  
First edition Second impression 2005

**ISBN 1-86888-283-7**

Published by Unisa Press  
University of South Africa  
PO Box 392, Unisa 0003

Printed and bound by ABC Press  
Editor: Charl Schutte  
Typeset, cover design and layout: Doris Hyman, Unisa Press

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# CONTENTS

MAPS .....	x
PREFACE .....	xiii

## CHAPTER ONE

Introduction .....	1
--------------------	---

The structure of the book .....	10
---------------------------------	----

## CHAPTER TWO

Some ways in which the Old Testament was received in Africa .....	13
--	----

Introduction .....	13
--------------------	----

Ostensible reasons for 'religious shifts' world-wide .....	16
--	----

'Judaising' movements in Africa .....	18
---------------------------------------	----

<i>The Khoikhoi</i> .....	20
---------------------------	----

<i>The Zulus</i> .....	21
------------------------	----

<i>The Sotho-Tswana and the laws of the Old Testament</i> .....	22
---	----

<i>The Xhosa: an ancient priesthood</i> .....	22
---	----

<i>The Dutch Boers – ancient Jews</i> .....	23
---	----

<i>The Lemba and their 'Jewish' identity</i> .....	24
--	----

Conclusion .....	28
------------------	----

## CHAPTER THREE

Conflicting accounts of the possible Semitic history and origins of the Lemba .....	31
--	----

Introduction .....	31
--------------------	----

Anthropological, archaeological and other accounts of the history and origins of the Lemba .....	32
---	----

<i>Maritime undertakings between the Semitic world     and East Africa and references to possible 'Semitic' groups in Southeast Africa</i> .....	32
--	----

<i>Accounts of the history of the Lemba north of the Limpopo</i> .....	38
--	----

<i>Accounts of the history of the Lemba south of the Limpopo</i> .....	44
--	----

Theories of origin .....	60
--------------------------	----

<i>A pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic origin</i> .....	61
---	----

<i>Relating oral traditions and historical facts to genetic data</i> .....	63
--	----

<i>Criticism of the pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic theory</i> .....	67
--	----

<i>An Islamic-Arabic origin</i> .....	67
---------------------------------------	----

<i>Criticism of the Islamic-Arabic theory</i> .....	69
---	----

<i>A Falasha-Abyssinian origin</i> .....	70
--	----

<i>Criticism of the Falasha-Abyssinian theory</i> .....	71
---	----

Evaluation .....	73
------------------	----

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Social practices of the Lemba and early Israel

	79
<b>Food rituals and taboos</b>	80
<i>The Lemba</i>	80
<i>Early Israel</i>	86
<i>Evaluation and comparison</i>	87
<b>Marital customs</b>	88
<i>The Lemba</i>	88
<i>Early Israel</i>	92
<i>Evaluation and comparison</i>	95
<b>Burial customs</b>	95
<i>The Lemba</i>	95
<i>Early Israel</i>	97
<i>Evaluation and comparison</i>	98
<b>Skilled professions</b>	99
<i>The Lemba</i>	99
<i>Early Israel</i>	102
<i>Evaluation and comparison</i>	104
<b>Social organisation</b>	105
<i>The Lemba</i>	105
<i>Twelve clans/lineages</i>	105
<i>Praises and praise-songs</i>	106
<i>A segmented society with a loose social organisation</i>	109
<i>Early Israel</i>	110
<i>Twelve clans</i>	110
<i>Praises and sayings</i>	110
<i>A segmented society with a loose social organisation</i>	112
<i>Evaluation and comparison</i>	114

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Religious experience among the Lemba and in early Israel

	117
<b>Religious experience among the Lemba</b>	119
<i>Conceptions of God/gods</i>	119
<i>Covenant-making with men</i>	123
<i>Ngoma lungundu ('the drum that thunders')</i>	123
<i>Mountains, rivers and other sacred places</i>	126
<i>The cult of the ancestors</i>	129
<i>Annunciations and other encounters</i>	133
<b>Religious experience in early Israel</b>	134
<i>Conceptions of God/gods</i>	134
<i>Covenant-making with men</i>	135
<i>The Ark of the Covenant</i>	136
<i>Mountains, rivers and other holy places</i>	137
<i>The cult of the ancestors</i>	138
<i>Annunciations and other encounters</i>	140



<b>Influences from different religions on the religious experience of the Lemba and early Israel</b>	140
<i>Influences from other religions on the religious experience of the Lemba</i>	141
African traditional religions	141
Christianity	141
Church affiliations	141
The influence of some Lemba practices on the Christian church	142
Islam	143
Modern Judaism	144
<i>The influence of other religions on the religious experience of early Israel</i>	146
The religion of the Canaanites	146
Egyptian monotheism and other religions	147
<b>Evaluation and comparison</b>	148

## CHAPTER SIX

### Myth among the Lemba and in early Israel 151

<b>Myth among the Lemba</b>	152
<i>Creation mythology</i>	152
From the 'Promised Land' through the desert, by sea to Africa	152
Guided by a star and ngoma lungundu	155
<b>Myth in early Israel</b>	158
<i>Creation mythology</i>	158
From Africa, through the sea and the desert to the 'Promised Land'	159
Guided by a pillar of cloud and fire and the Ark of the Covenant	160
<b>Evaluation and comparison</b>	160

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Rites among the Lemba and in early Israel 162

<b>Rites among the Lemba</b>	162
<i>Rituals of passage</i>	162
Male circumcision (ngoma)	162
The initiation ritual for women	169
The New Moon ceremony	172
<i>Rituals of sacrifice</i>	174
The Pesah	174
Thevhula and unleavened food	174
First Fruit and Harvest Festival	177
Fasting	178
Other sacrifices	178
<b>Rites in early Israel</b>	179
<i>Rituals of passage</i>	179
Male circumcision	179
The initiation ritual for women	181
The New Moon ceremony	182
<i>Rituals of sacrifice</i>	182
The Passover or Pesah	183
The Festival of the Unleavened Bread	184



<i>First Fruits or Harvest Festival</i> .....	185
<i>The Day of Atonement</i> .....	185
<i>Other sacrifices</i> .....	186
<b>Evaluation and comparison</b> .....	187

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Law and ethics among the Lemba and in early Israel** 191

<b>Law and ethics among the Lemba</b> .....	191
<i>The Covenant</i> .....	192
<i>The law</i> .....	193
<i>Case law</i> .....	194
<i>Covenant obligations</i> .....	194
Casuistic laws .....	194
Monetary compensation .....	194
Earning one's own living .....	194
Offerings made at childbirth .....	196
<i>Family ethics and women</i> .....	196
Chief, elders and a patriarchal family .....	196
Inheritance .....	197
Virginity of women .....	197
Women as items of chattel .....	197
<i>Economic ethics</i> .....	198
<i>Dietary laws, cleanliness and other codes</i> .....	198
<i>Enemies within</i> .....	198
<i>No centralised authority to enforce these laws</i> .....	198
<i>Proverbs</i> .....	198
<b>Law and ethics in early Israel</b> .....	200
<i>The Covenant</i> .....	201
Exodus 20 .....	201
Joshua 24 .....	201
<i>The Ten Commandments (Ex 20)</i> .....	202
<i>Case law</i> .....	202
Casuistic laws .....	202
Monetary compensation (Exodus 21; 22) .....	202
Slavery (Exodus 21:1-12) .....	202
Widows, orphans, resident aliens and hospitality (Exodus 22:21ff) .....	203
Offering for the first-born (Exodus 22:29-30) .....	203
<i>Family ethics and women</i> .....	203
Judges, elders and a patriarchal system .....	204
Inheritance .....	204
Virginity of women .....	204
Women as chattels .....	204
<i>Economic ethics</i> .....	205
<i>Priestly codes in Leviticus</i> .....	205
Leviticus 11 .....	205
Sex taboos and prohibited marriages .....	205
Priestly groups .....	205
<i>Enemies from within</i> .....	206

<i>No centralised authority to enforce the Code of the Covenant</i> .....	206
<i>Proverbs</i> .....	206
<b>Evaluation and comparison</b> .....	207

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Lemba and early Israel as oral cultures ..... 209

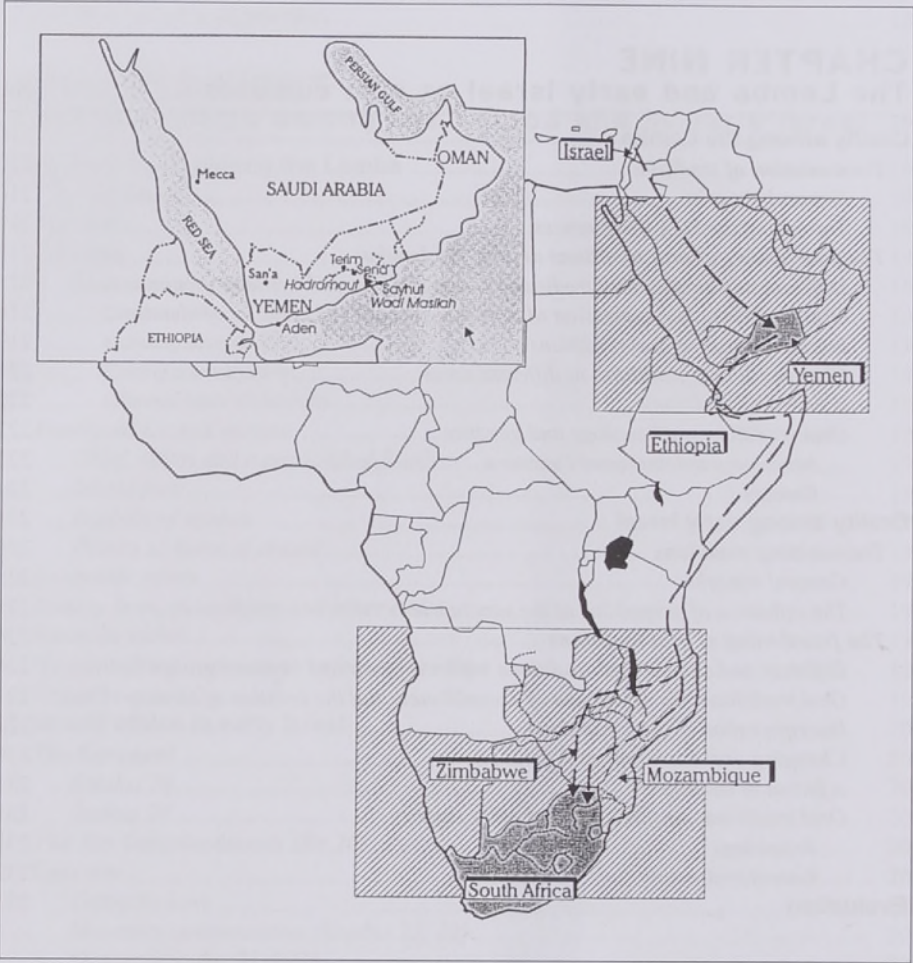
<b>Orality among the Lemba</b> .....	210
<i>Transmission of tradition</i> .....	210
<i>General remarks</i> .....	210
<i>The role of the LCA Conferences</i> .....	212
<i>The functioning of oral traditions among the Lemba</i> .....	215
<i>Different and similar oral traditions within a group and between groups</i> .....	215
<i>Oral traditions, the expression of a world-view and the creation of identity</i> .....	218
<i>Inscriptionation of oral traditions</i> .....	219
<i>Changes in oral traditions at different times</i> .....	221
<i>A fusion of traditions</i> .....	222
<i>Oral traditions, archaeology and genetics</i> .....	222
<i>Archaeology and other groups' traditions</i> .....	222
<i>Genetics</i> .....	224
<b>Orality among early Israel</b> .....	224
<i>Transmitting traditions</i> .....	225
<i>General remarks</i> .....	225
<i>The influence of assemblies at the sanctuaries</i> .....	225
<i>The functioning of oral traditions</i> .....	226
<i>Different and similar oral traditions within a group and between groups</i> .....	226
<i>Oral traditions, the expression of a world-view and the creation of identity</i> .....	227
<i>Inscriptionation of oral traditions</i> .....	228
<i>Changing oral traditions at different times</i> .....	230
<i>A fusion of traditions</i> .....	231
<i>Oral traditions, archaeology and other sources</i> .....	231
<i>Archaeology</i> .....	231
<i>Extra-biblical sources</i> .....	232
<b>Evaluation</b> .....	232

## CHAPTER TEN

### Conclusion ..... 235

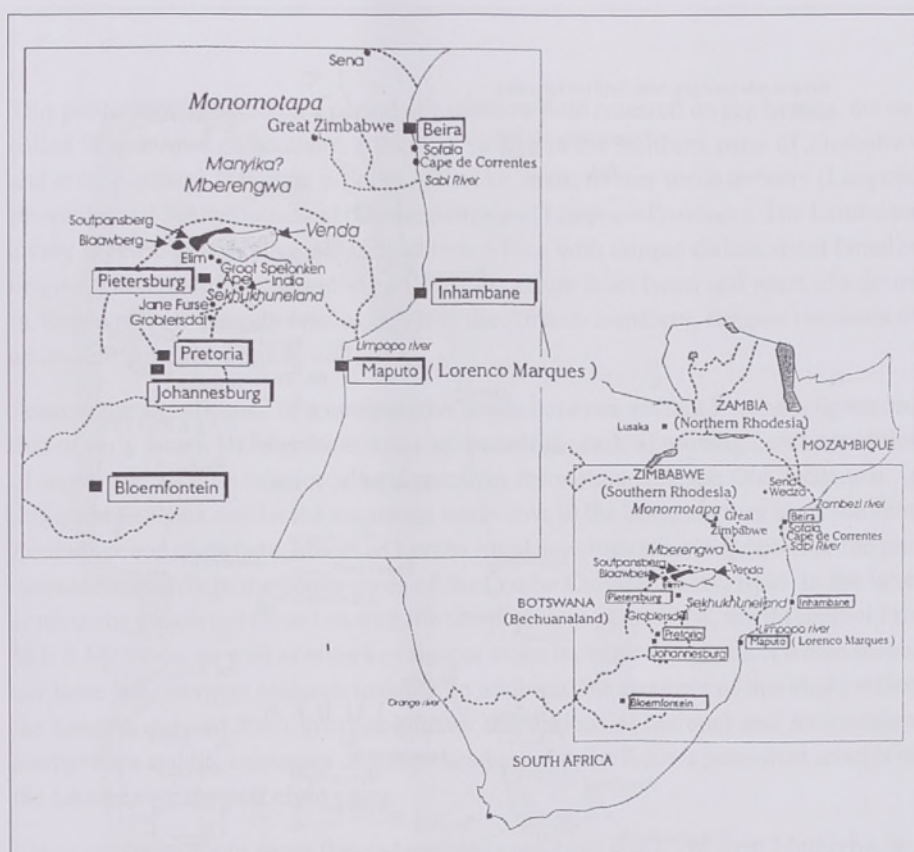
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	243
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	246
<b>ADDENDUM I</b> .....	268
<b>ADDENDUM II</b> .....	270
<b>ADDENDUM III</b> .....	276
<b>INDEX</b> .....	303

MAPS



Map I *The Lemba's supposed journey to the south*





**Map II** *Some Lemba territories in Southern Africa*

Now at this time the Jews held the following cities of Syria. . .

(Antiquities 13:395)  
—404  
(Var. 1: 106)



**Map III** *The Kingdom of Alexander Janneus 103 to 76 BCE*

## PREFACE

---

This publication is based on a period of extensive field research on the Lemba, the so-called 'Black Jews of Southern Africa', who live in the southern parts of Zimbabwe and in the Northern Transvaal in South Africa, i.e. in the former Venda territory (Limpopo Province) and Sekhukhuneland (Mpumalanga and Limpopo Province). The Lemba are a very specific group of people in Southern Africa with unique claims about Israelite origins. Their traditions, signalling an early departure from Israel and years of sojourn in Yemen prior to moving southwards into the African continent, suggest remnants of an ancient Israelite religion.

Sensing the significance of a comparative study between ancient Lemba religion and that of early Israel, Dr Magdel le Roux set herself the task of probing Lemba tradition of origin and all their religio-cultural practices resonating with the Old Testament. In this quest Le Roux conducted numerous interviews in the Soutpansberg area, southern Zimbabwe and elsewhere, observed Lemba ritual activities wherever possible and participated regularly in the conferences of the Lemba Cultural Association. In the latter context she developed close ties with the late president of the LCA, the influential Prof M E R Mathivha, as well as other key figures in the movement – contacts which helped her hone her emergent research insights. In addition, the contents of this study reflect the benefits derived from interdisciplinary discussions at national and international conferences and the responses of fellow academics to Le Roux's published articles on the Lemba over the past eight years.

There can be no doubt about the remarkable contents of this book. Prof Mathivha, in a letter to Le Roux (dated 15-12-2000) commented on the original manuscript – then still in doctoral thesis form – as follows: 'The [Lemba] community is greatly interested in the contents of the book and they say you have recorded the community matter of the Lemba. *This is an authentic record of the Lemba* (my italics). Such comment suggests that this study will serve as a reference work to the Lemba community, to the Kulano organisation which serves scattered Jews and to 'Judaising groups' world-wide.

Prof Knut Holter (School of Theology, Norway) in turn, lauded Le Roux's attempt in her doctoral thesis to compare early Israel and the Lemba as a background for Africanized biblical scholarship. He underscored his support for the publication of a commercial edition of her thesis as follows: 'Le Roux's material ... is indeed unique, and her analysis of this material is relevant and thorough. [The envisaged book] will gain interest from two perspectives, which both are of relevance for the development of African theology and an Africanized biblical scholarship. First, when the perspective is to let the Old Testament interpret Africa, her analysis will provide material for an African



inculturation of biblical concepts and an Africanization of Old Testament teaching and research.... Secondly, when the perspective is to let Africa interpret the Old Testament, Le Roux's analysis - will also contribute more generally to Old Testament interpretation.' This high praise from a professional reflects the book's multi-disciplinary relevance and exploratory significance in a wide field of scholarship.

Finally, I wish to commend this publication on the following grounds: Le Roux succeeds in taking Lemba traditions seriously and engages in a convincing comparative study between Lemba and early Israelite customs and beliefs, without verifying on falsifying Lemba claims to Israelite origination. Her qualitative field research is a first in Old Testament scholarship in so far as she attempts not only to indicate the points of convergence between African and Old Testament customs - as surveyed in previous studies - but also to determine the extent to which the culture of early Israel (1250-1000 BCE) is similar to African cultures, more specifically to that of the Lemba. Significant implications for the interpretation of the Old Testament customs in the African context, moreover, derive from such comparisons. The way in which the Lemba reconciled their Old Testament related customs and traditions with the Christian faith suggests innovative models of teaching the Old Testament in the African context. Apparently it is no coincidence that the Lemba, on the whole, did not leave the so-called 'mainline' churches after their conversion as many other African Christians did. As Le Roux points out, most of the Lemba in southern Zimbabwe are members of the African (Dutch) Reformed and Lutheran Churches. Missiologically, therefore, this study provides clues about the correlation between a Western-type missionary proclamation of the biblical message and the incidence of 'separation' leading to African Initiated Church (AIC) formation.

Due to the richly diversified tapestry of insights woven into the text of this publication I have no hesitation in recommending it as a valuable and in many respects seminal contribution to the study of religions, theologies and cultures of the people of Africa.

### **M L Daneel**

*Professor Extraordinary: UNISA, Pretoria*

*Professor of Missiology: Boston University, School of Theology*

# CHAPTER ONE

---

## Introduction

My personal story hails from Africa and it began when my father bought a farm - high up in the Soutpansberg.<sup>1</sup> There, for the first time, I heard the Lemba story ... and since then, this African story has become my own.

It was in this Soutpansberg area that our family were introduced (in 1984) to a farmer, Piet Wessels, who told us all he knew about a fascinating group of people with their Semitic features and practices and who distinguished themselves from the surrounding Venda by their special way of living. Moreover, most of these Lemba people regarded themselves as Jews or Israelites who have migrated southwards into Yemen and later as traders into Africa.

My general interest in history and post-graduate specialisation in the Old Testament, prompted me to collect as much information about this interesting group as possible. The mere possibility of such a group in our midst, absolutely intrigued me. I thought I might just have 'discovered' a 'lost tribe of Israel' right on our doorstep, who might be able to illuminate my concepts of pre-monarchic Israel.

But it was only after my father died and after the completion of my MA dissertation on the pre-monarchic clans of Israel, that I first had an encounter with (the retired) Prof M E R Mathivha, President<sup>2</sup> of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA). This took place in August 1994, at his home in Shiyandima (Limpopo Province). After this interview I attended a special LCA Conference in April, and thereafter the Annual Conferences in October, at Sweet Waters, in the Limpopo Province, ever since.

I soon learnt that the Lemba people are scattered all over South Africa and the rest of Southern Africa and that they are directly related to the Vãremba in Zimbabwe and the Mwenye in Mozambique and elsewhere. However, most of them are concentrated in the former Venda (the Limpopo Province), Sekhukhuneland (present-day Mpumalanga and Limpopo Province) as well as the southern parts of Zimbabwe. It was only in the early sixties of the twentieth century, that some of the leaders of these different groups learnt about each other.



Even during the special conference in April 1995, Chief Mpaketsane of Sekhukhuneland invited me to pursue my research in their communities. I willingly accepted and decided to conduct it from a *qualitative research*<sup>3</sup> point of view, mainly in three geographical areas, namely, Sekhukhuneland, Venda and the southern parts of Zimbabwe. This study remains, therefore, regionally and contextually restricted.

The Lemba's enthusiasm for sacred hills, animal sacrifice, ritual slaughtering of animals, food taboos, their circumcision rites and endogamy - all seemed to suggest a Semitic influence or resemblances, embedded in an African culture. Therefore, my focus was on their customs, festivals, ceremonies, rites, holy places, religion and whatever illuminates their culture as such. I was further surprised to learn that most of the Lemba are of Christian tradition and heritage as well and I was interested in their way of interpreting the Bible from their 'Semitic' background.

Therefore, before I formally gave attention to archival (secondary) sources and any other literature in 1997, I decided first to conduct *qualitative research*. This turned out to be a wise decision, since one could then weigh secondary material against *first-hand information*, gained from the Lemba themselves. Ultimately, however, this project is based on both secondary sources (when and where available) and qualitative field research. Due to the limited scholarly attention devoted to the Lemba, secondary material alone would have been inadequate. Therefore, qualitative research methods were used, which included *participant observation*, *in-depth interviewing* and *falsification* (testing the validity of material by using false statements).

This project attempts to understand the motives and beliefs behind Lemba customs and practices. According to this principle the Lemba are therefore not being studied merely as Jews (or a tribe of Israel) *per se*, but rather as a manifestation of Judaism or Jewishness as experienced by a specific group or individual. Anderson (1996:161) stresses that 'ascertaining the "truth" of a belief is less important than the realization that the belief makes sense in relation to one's overall world-view.' We live in a world of fragmented identities, and in terms of postmodernism, we have learned that we all construct our own (fragmented) identities. Thus we are not to search for some 'ideal' identity out there, neither are we to impose such an identity on others.

Each religious orientation has a different vision of ultimate reality. However, there is always a common goal: To be in harmony with what is most important, what is eternal and what is most powerful. Qualitative research methods, as well as anthropological relativism, demand tolerance for other religious experiences, an awareness of a new fairness and openness in the study of the other (whether it is another culture, colour, religion or gender), and ultimately demand a more holistic approach. A new respect for the wisdom of traditional societies and religions is imperative, when one realises that some such societies may have endured many onslaughts and other adverse circumstances, for thousands of years, whereas modernist society may not even last for another century.



In October 1995 I not only attended the annual LCA Conference (as mentioned above) but started my field research in the former homeland of Venda, conducting numerous interviews in the Soutpansberg area. During the period of February to October 1996 I returned to the field, staying among the Lemba, observing as much as I could and interviewing as many Lemba as possible in the northern and eastern parts of South Africa and the southern parts of Zimbabwe (*cf Photos 1; 2*).



**Photo 1** *Group interview, Gutu, Zimbabwe*

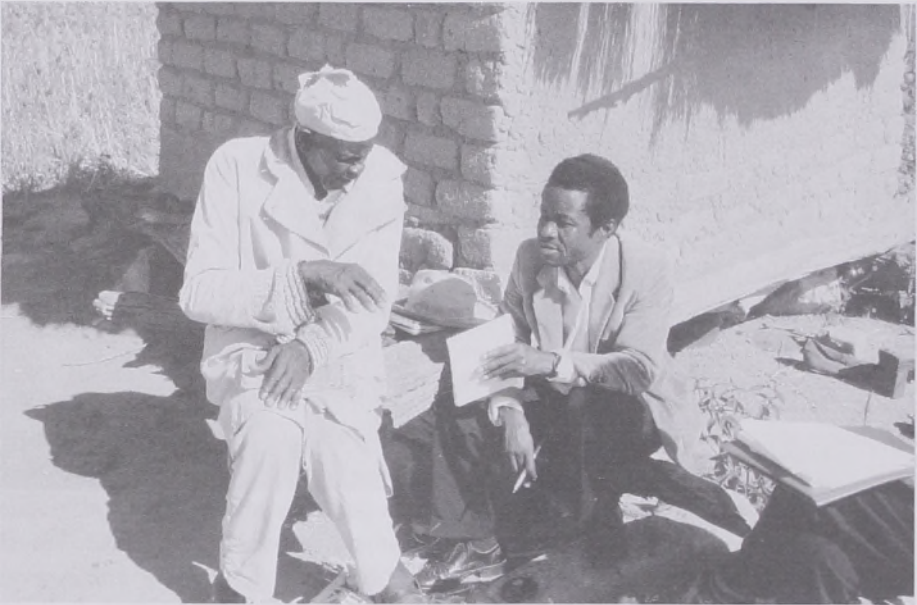
As far as I know the Lemba in Sekhukhuneland have never before been included in a field study. In the end, this area produced very worthwhile information on their traditions.

During our stay – that of my husband, who was also the photographer, and myself – in Sekhukhuneland (March 1996), Chief Mpaketsane (*cf Photo 3*), organised a special LCA Conference in his kraal in India Village (Sekhukhuneland), in order to assist me in my research in the area. Dancers, drummers and speakers performed, demonstrated and explained anything I asked for (*cf Photo 4*). This meeting also gave me the opportunity to interview and observe many more people and situations than would otherwise have been possible.

My field notes include descriptions of the settings, of my actions and comments, as well as of the sequence and duration of events and conversations. Describing the

setting provides a mental picture of the place and the activity where the interviews took place. My comments include my awarenesses, feelings, hunches, preconceptions and indicate future areas of enquiry. By way of metaphor, the 'flesh' added to the bare 'skeleton', created by the field notes, was made up of my interview data.

In fact, the purpose of my field study was as far as possible to gather all existing oral traditions with an Old Testament resonance, from amongst the above-mentioned Lemba communities, in order to observe their 'Jewish' customs, religious pluralism and interdependence – subjects which have thus far not yet received due scholarly attention.



**Photo 2** *Individual interview in Gutu, Zimbabwe (interpreter: Mr Chiwara, ZIRRCON)*





**Photo 3** *Chief Mpaketsane of Sekhukhuneland, addressing his people during a LCA Conference at India village*



**Photo 4** *Dancers, drummers and praise singers at the special LCA Conference, Sekhukhuneland*



from scholarship. I was guided by three themes in my inquiry: (i) the oral traditions of the Lemba people, (ii) their customs, festivals and ceremonies and (iii) their concept of God and of Christianity.

After the first round, in the former Venda (Limpopo Province, October 1995), I felt the need to reduce the 'academic' nature of some of the questions, analysed the questions and rephrased some of them. Most of the Lemba indicated that they were Christians. On account of this it was clear that much depended on the church that the particular person or group belonged to, and on whether they understood the questions about certain religious elements. I found that they could not relate to certain questions at all, for example: 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?' or 'How do you understand the way of salvation?' or 'Do you have a personal relationship with God?' Therefore I was prepared to drop these questions in specific settings and rather ask questions such as: 'Are you a Christian?' 'Do you pray?' 'To whom do you pray?' 'When do you pray?' and, 'What is the relationship between Jesus/God and the ancestors?'

During the second round of testing the guidelines (Sekhukhuneland, March 1996) I, once again, realised that the educational level of the respondents was another major factor which would determine the ease or difficulty of conducting the interviews, and that this was applicable to any cultural group. After careful consideration and the experience of the 'second round', it was decided to include additional topics and to drop others (cf ADDENDUM I).

After another round of field work in 1996, I consulted the anthropologists Prof F de Beer and Dr J Boeyens,<sup>4</sup> and they assisted me in refining the questionnaire yet further (cf ADDENDUM II).<sup>5</sup> The more incisive questions were posed especially to the academics from among Lemba ranks and to other interested parties from the University of Harare and elsewhere. Obviously, not all the information obtained from the field work could be used in this project, but every bit of information contributed to the image which could be formed of the Lemba, even if it was impossible to write it all down.

Between March and October 1997 we had the opportunity to return to most of the places we had visited during the previous year. The purpose was mainly to verify information gained during the former visits, to fill in certain gaps in the information, by again making use of falsification, as a method of elimination of data. With the assistance of Profs M Daneel, F de Beer and Dr J Boeyens again, I tried to adapt and improve my interview guide from time to time. Their contributions as advisers to my study were invaluable and are highly appreciated.

One of the purposes of this book is to reflect some of the results of the field work conducted in the above mentioned geographical areas between October 1995 and to October 1997, as well as to reflect information from other written documents on the Lemba. Throughout the research the impact of the Old Testament on the creation of oral traditions and identity is kept in mind. Attention is paid to the way the identity of the

Lemba is manifested in the traditions of their origin and through their religio-cultural practices. The purpose is further to determine in what way this group might shed new light on our concepts of early Israel and on our understanding of the Old Testament and Christianity in Africa.

I compare the Lemba with early Israel (1250-1000 BCE, i.e. before the monarchy), since: (i) their communities function according to a segmented clan system without a common leader; (ii) this period is interesting for the study of oral cultures; and (iii) they regard themselves as 'children of Abraham' who at one stage or another stage came to Africa.

Various traditions exist regarding as to when the Lemba came to Africa. Some say it was during the time of Solomon, others again aver that they came with Arab traders coming to southern Africa, and while a few informed leaders maintain that they came in about 586 BC. This implies that a comparison to the post-exilic era could also have been done. The Lemba are merely used as an exemplar (case study), because they make particular claims and because they are accessible to me.

During the field study the following questions emerged: What role did the missionaries play in the invention or creation of specific traditions and eventually in Lemba identity? Is their use of 'Judaism' merely a biblical veneer covering over essentially African traditional practices? Or is their symbolic use of 'Judaism' one that had been channelled through Christianity or Islam? What is the role or function of oral traditions in the creation of identity? What role does oral tradition play in the preservation of history? And finally: What is the function of oral traditions in oral cultures such as the early Israelite and the Lemba communities? However, not all of these questions will be addressed.

Many comparative studies between the Old Testament and Africa have been done already (cf the Nuer of Southern Sudan, the Tallensi of Ghana, the Tiv of Nigeria, the Masai of Kenya, [Fiensy 1987:74]). This research has indicated that there are numerous points of contingency between most African cultural customs, which are also reflected in the Old Testament. Many writers have observed these similarities, yet few have investigated the *extent* to which the Israelite culture is similar to or different from African cultures. Although few have compared the cultures, yet several have written on the Israelite culture only, while others have written about certain African cultures. These studies are usually predominantly anthropologically orientated. The premise is generally that oral cultures all have the same inherent tendencies and therefore by means of comparisons between the cultures, one can arrive at a general theory; a kind of inductive method.

This project seeks to determine to what extent the culture of early Israel (1250-1000 BCE) is similar to African cultures, more specifically to that of the Lemba. Although a mere comparison between the culture of early Israel and with that of certain African tribes is interesting, that is not the primary objective here. It should further be stated



clarified that it is neither an anthropological study, nor is it the intent that the emphasis should be on the Lemba as such – although they do receive a substantial amount of attention. The ambit within which this study operates finally, is ultimately within Old Testament Studies. Therefore, the study of the Lemba is secondary subsidiary to the *point of contingency* which their culture may have with Old Testament customs and traditions, and to how this information can affect the interpretation of Old Testament texts, as well as the teaching of the Old Testament and Christianity in Africa.

Furthermore, to my mind the Lemba and their particular traditions of origin and identity, as well as their particular characteristics and practices, open numerous possibilities for further research. It may be that these people with their oral culture and ‘double’ (if not triple) identity are one of the very few extant ‘living sources’ which may still make a possible contribution to the better understanding of the reception of the Old Testament (and Christianity) in an African context. By referring to the Lemba as a ‘living source’, I do not necessarily accept all their claims, but am aware that communities, as they are reflected in the Old Testament, are becoming scarcer in the present-day world.

This project comprises some comparisons, but is different from previous studies in a number of respects:

First, although I used qualitative research, (an *inductive method*), in the field study, the greatest part of the *application of the data* (about religious perspectives and practices) in this book is mediated or *guided by theory* (that of Smart, cf Chapters Five to Eight); thus it is *deductive*. The project also deals with the role of oral traditions, history and historiography.

Second, the Lemba are also a very specific African group with claims about Judaistic/Israelite origins. Their early departure from Israel (according to some, ca 586 BCE) could imply that their religion could contain remnants of a very ancient type of religion, which might be of great value when these are juxtaposed with those of early Israel. This study *takes Lemba traditions seriously*. However, it does not endeavour to verify or falsify Lemba claims. Their claims are an interesting additional datum, which makes this group special and interesting in the study of oral cultures. Their claims are tested, in a number of ways, by other scholars (e.g. Spurdle & Jenkins 1992; Thomas [et al] and others 1998; 2000). Questions such as whether their so-called Jewish origins can be ‘proven’ by their oral traditions and whether a comparison between Lemba traditions with the Old Testament can make a contribution to the debate about the claims of the Lemba are addressed, but only as a sub-theme.

Third, this project searches for *an understanding of the relevance of the Old Testament in Africa* and is therefore selective and not an exhaustive comparison between the Lemba and early Israel. I have mainly selected mainly representative social and religious practices from these two entities and principally those which are most important for understanding the world of early Israel and of the Lemba. The respective readings of



biblical texts are meant only to highlight the way in which particular social or religious practices function and are not meant to provide a complete exegesis. Therefore, the purpose is not to provide an intensive exegesis of certain Old Testament passages, neither is it to determine the historicity of certain narratives or customs. It is rather *to determine what early Israel's experience of about certain customs and rituals was* and what role it played in their communities. It has to be accepted that the Book of Judges is the only direct source of information for early Israel and therefore it should be used with great circumspection. Although the Book of Judges forms part of the Deuteronomistic historiography and may therefore, be dated long after the events (e.g. during the Exile), it probably still contains traditions about early Israel, and thus early conditions are reflected in it.

Fourth, a comparison with the Old Testament tribal community enables us to gain valuable insight into *how the Biblical message is proclaimed* and how it functions in a specific African community. Research into such a community of the Lemba requires a multidisciplinary approach in order to understand the Lemba's way of combining *Judaism and Christianity*. The Lemba community seems to have a unique Africanized pattern of Jewish and Christian interaction with African world-views and traditional religions. Here we not only find an interpretation of the New Testament message but also a 'living proof' of the Old Testament's influence on the Lemba community. This study includes comparative empirical research between the ancient Israelite tribes/clans and the Lemba communities with reference to the contextualization of the Biblical message. It was therefore of great interest to probe into the way in which the Semitic background of the Lemba is interwoven with their Christian principles. In my opinion, an interdisciplinary or holistic approach has the potential to offer a comprehensive analysis and an in-depth understanding of the Lemba tribal community.

In particular, the contribution of the Lemba (as many other groups) to the world church has gone unnoticed because it has hitherto found expression mainly in 'celebration, song and dance'. This, among other features, indicates parallels with the oral culture of the Israelite clans. I found that a type of mythology has developed around certain places, people and events in the past. This, as well as the type of doctrine which is being taught, will be explored. It is quite possible that the Lemba have accepted laws of a unique nature, as a result of their blend of Old Testament and tribal values. Throughout the research I attempted to integrate information about how their religion relates among other things, to geography, rain, agriculture, prosperity and adversity. As far as participant observation is concerned, important issues such as church meetings, rites, ceremonies, feasts, institutions, manners and customs are noted and studied intensively. Insights regarding Lemba initiatives in the assimilation and propagation of Christian and Judaistic values are gained. This could be an important contribution to understanding the Africanisation of biblical religions.

## The structure of the book

*Chapter Two* deals with a number of Judaising groups, as a worldwide phenomenon as well as in Africa, more specifically in Southern Africa. Specific attention is given to possible reasons which could underlie a religious shift, the role missionaries played in the invention and creation of especially Jewish traditions, and the identity of numerous groups (cf the Zulu, Xhosa, Hottentots and Boers). Other groups in Southern Africa such as the AIC (African Independent [or Initiated] Churches) also show a vibrant interest in the Old Testament. I shall refer to them, but the actual study of those groups resides outside the purview of this investigation. The focus is on the Lemba, who regard themselves as the 'Black Jews' of Southern Africa, and on the social processes that may have created their unique identity, as well as on possible reasons for what makes them think the way they do.

*Chapter Three* presents the history and customs of the Lemba, as recorded by various authors. It will draw from anthropological, archaeological, ethnological, genetic and many other sources, in an attempt to provide maximum understanding. Every possible connection the Lemba could have had with Semitic influences is indicated, from their own indigenous accounts to those in colonial archives to travellers' accounts and even museum collections are referred to. In this chapter, as well as in other chapters, there are cursory references, where applicable, to similar customs and practices in other African groups. Understandably, scholars have not agreed on the *origins* of the Lemba and it is definitely not the intention of the present study to resolve the issues surrounding this problem. One needs to accept, though, that the various reports or accounts of the Lemba have been interpreted through the presuppositions and motives of each respective author. No one is free from this. Therefore, this chapter is entitled 'Conflicting accounts of the possible "Semitic" history and origins of the Lemba'.

*Chapter Four* deals with the social practices of the Lemba and early Israel: food rituals, marital customs, burial customs, special skills and their social organisation. The main questions addressed here are: 'Who is subjected to whom?', 'Who may marry whom?' and 'Who is included and who not?' However, many questions still remain to be asked.

The theoretical framework for *Chapters Five to Eight* is that developed by Smart (1983), a scholar in the field of comparative religion. He proposes that the religion of pre-industrial communities needs to be studied under the title of 'Worldview' [sic] and this title would then mean an individual or a group's orientation to life. Questions need to be asked about the 'very nature of existence': 'Our place in the cosmos and our connections with other human beings – those within our family and culture and those we consider foreign and different' (Smart 1983:22-27).

Smart stresses that world-views are neither monolithic nor static and provides different heuristic categories or dimensions that he found useful in exploring the religious aspects of ancient Israel. The categories taken as a basis for explaining the religious views



and practices of the Lemba and early Israel are the following: the experiential (Chapter Five), the mythical (Chapter Six), the ritual (Chapter Seven) and the legal and ethical dimensions (Chapter Eight). These categories often overlap and may be broken down into many other facets, but these are helpful and they provide a way of obtaining a perspective on traditions. Differences and similarities in the oral traditions and practices in the different groups, are discussed.

Fundamental questions underlying behind *Chapter Nine* are: 'To what extent are *oral traditions* a search for identity of the Lemba?' 'When did certain oral traditions become important to them?' 'What is the purpose of folklore, traditions and customs within a society?' 'What role does identity play in determining whether a group is inclusive or exclusive?' And many more. Considering the way in which oral traditions functioned within Lemba communities, the most pressing need would be to apply this discussion to the oral traditions of early Israel reflected in the Old Testament. This juxtaposition is necessary for a better understanding of the role which different oral traditions played in ancient Israel, as well as of the possible functions of these oral traditions and practices within the social structure of the Old Testament. A more accurate understanding could be required considering within the complexity of cults, movements and political structures in relation to oral traditions, as a type of social process. This of course is no simple task.

Traditions most certainly change to accommodate new circumstances, but once the traditions relating to community identity are written down, a new model of an unchanging body of traditions is created. To a certain extent this might have been the case with Mathivha's book (1992), as might also have been the case with the historiography of the Deuteronomist. The moment these were fixed, they became something else. Which social processes lead to the creation of identity through historiography? What were the social contexts within which both these bodies of texts originated? Do they reveal something about the kind of text? However, this is only an explorative study, which is not discussed in much detail. Nevertheless, there is room for more research regarding matters such as the functioning of customs, narratives, sayings in a pre-industrial community.

In the conclusion, *Chapter Ten*, I again refer to the relevance of the Old Testament in an African context and the possible implications for the interpretation of the Old Testament, suggesting further study of these phenomena in Africa. The numerous points of contingency between the customs of, among others, the Lemba and those customs reflected in the Old Testament will differ from those on other continents and in other countries. This implies that the teaching of the Old Testament in, for instance, Denmark or Germany will be different from what it would be in Africa. Lastly, I refer to the implications of this kind of study for the relevance of the Old Testament to missionary endeavours in Africa.



## NOTES

1. Louis Trichardt, Limpopo Province, Republic of South Africa.
2. Prof Mathivha has since passed away and has been succeeded by Mr Samuel Moeti.
3. Qualitative research refers to research that focuses on *qualities of human behaviour*, as well as on the holistic nature of social behaviour. Taylor and Bogdan define qualitative research as research that produces descriptive data. The researcher collects people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour. Rist (in Taylor & Bogdon 1984:5–8) points out that qualitative methodology is more than a set of data gathering techniques. He mentions, for example, that qualitative research is inductive, humanistic, looks at settings and people holistically, the researchers are sensitive to their effects on the people they study, try to experience reality as others experience it, does not seek 'truth' or 'morality' but rather a detailed understanding of others' perspectives. In this project I attempt to keep these principles of qualitative research in mind and to apply them as far as possible.
4. De Beer and Boeyens are lecturers in the Department of Anthropology and Indigenous Law, at the University of South Africa.
5. The use of the standardised questionnaire by Van Warmelo [s a], was suggested, and I employed this with great success. Although not all the questions were used in every interview, this nevertheless offered effective guidelines, according to which additional information was gathered.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Some ways in which the Old Testament was received in Africa

### Introduction

History books and other accounts indicate that during the pre-Islamic period (before 600 CE) Judaism spread into Saudi Arabia, Africa and the rest of the world, resulting in more than one tribe in Africa embracing a form of Judaism. Different reasons were offered for these Jewish roots.<sup>1</sup> At present there are numerous synagogues in India and Judaising<sup>2</sup> groups in Japan and in Yemen. There are also many 'Black Jews' in the USA, who came from West Africa.<sup>3</sup>

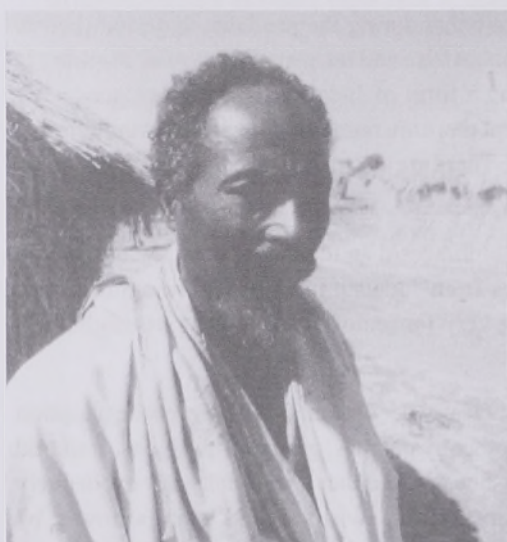
A problem is that each Judaising group embraces/d an identity shaped by ideology; a Jewish identity which sometimes differs from Judaism proper. According to Parfitt, 'Jewishness' often denotes/d something very far removed from what we might term 'authentic' Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Parfitt 1997b:2<sup>5</sup> The truth of this is most clearly seen when one observes the adoption of Judaism *en masse* in some form or another by peoples, groups or religions. It should therefore be noted that the idea of 'Jewishness' is neither specifically nor exclusively Jewish. Parfitt observes that the phenomenon of Jewishness has been borrowed by various groups and peoples throughout history and made to serve a variety of functions for different reasons. This evokes the question of how 'Judaism' should be defined. 'There is, of course, no stable object called Judaism' (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:2), but one possible definition of Judaism is that it is

the system and practice of the religion that emerged from the study of the Old Testament after the exile, laying heavy stress on the precepts of the law and nowadays consisting in conservative, reform, orthodox and reconstructing Judaism (Deist 1984:88).

Commonly, Judaism refers to both a religious and an ethnic community who reflect a particular way of life and who practise a unique set of beliefs and values.<sup>6</sup> This leads me to the deduction that it is virtually impossible not to be a member of the Jewish ethnic or religious community if one was born of Jewish parents.

In order to facilitate the understanding of the so-called Judaising groups in Africa, I shall investigate the following problem areas: the Judaism of Judaising groups and 'authentic' Judaism, as well as the historical and existential relationship of Balemba or Lemba 'Judaism' with 'authentic' Judaism. Did the Lemba specifically make a religious shift at one stage or another? Or did they choose to identify with the idea of being Jewish or rather Israelite, because it confirmed and reinforced their traditions of origin and Semitic customs? Or are they simply one of the lost tribes of Israel or part of a number of tribes? Although Judaism and Jewishness are not equal concepts, in the context of these groups, they are now sometimes used as though they were interchangeable. The question remains as Parfitt (1987:3) put it: To what should Judaism or Jewishness be reduced before it stops being Judaism?



**Photo 5** *A Falasha in Um Raquba, Sudan (Parfitt, 1987)*

All over the world definitions of religion and identity are changing and we realise that we live in a world of fragmented identities. In general, religion can be described as belief, as well as a link with specific images and emotions. Religion is also closely related to cosmology and magical practices. These beliefs (among others) constitute 'identity'. There are many expressions of belief which may appeal to people, but they usually seek a community that largely expresses or confirms what they already believe.

The theory regarding the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, links to the history of when the Ten Tribes of the Northern Kingdom (of Israel) were carried off into exile by the Assyrians (722/1 BCE), never to return (cf 2 Ki 15:29; 17:4-6; 18:11). Those tribes of course were not known as Jews, but as Israelites. Over the centuries there were many theories about



what happened to these tribes and today there are many groups who claim to be descendants of the Ten Tribes, even in Africa. From the Assyrian Inscriptions it is clear that, broadly estimated, at best, only twenty percent of the Israelite population was taken into exile after 722 BCE. The perception that Ten Tribes were carried away and thus got lost, should probably be read against the background of the Judaistic claim that only Judah represents the 'real Israel'.

What confuses the situation is that many other indigenous groups in Africa have many manners and customs with a Semitic resonance. Where did they get this from? Are they descendants of the lost tribes? Or is there any evidence of a more general religion that existed earlier throughout the world? And where do the Lemba fit in?

An impediment to this study is the apparent non-existence of any Jewish record of ties with 'lost' tribes elsewhere. Also, for approximately the last fifteen hundred years Judaism has not looked very favourably on such 'conversion to Judaism' movements and tended to ignore them.<sup>7</sup> Currently the Israeli Government does not have a particular interest in any Jewish groups in Africa. Smythe (1962:101) confirms

... that the refugees who have come to Israel in more recent years, especially the darker-hued Jews from North Africa and Yemen, have found themselves segregated and looked upon as inferiors. Although the Israeli Government officially opposes any undemocratic practices against these diverse newcomers they are still considered less equal than the dominant population group and suffer some form of discrimination and segregation.

These factors constitute a paucity of written (historical) records of these groups. Only oral and ceremonial traditions preserve possible links with Judaism 'proper'.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, comparativists (colonialists, observers, missionaries and others) who came to southern Africa imposed the idea of a Semitic heritage on almost all the indigenous peoples - from the 'Hottentots' to the Dutch Boers - instead of considering them in their own contexts. This led to biased and one-sided interpretations of traditional African religions. Theorists firmly believed that all 'savages' were degenerated remnants of more civilised races.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Parfitt (1987:2) is convinced that 'there is scarcely a people in the world which has not at some time been identified as one of the lost tribes of Israel'.

In the long run, very few of these groups in southern Africa really accepted the 'Jewishness' imposed upon them. Others identified with the notion of Jewishness, probably because it confirmed and reinforced their own ancient traditions and customs.

During my field research, it became clear that the Lemba have oral traditions claiming that they came from Israel as well as many practices with an Old Testament resonance, but *most of the Lemba have been converted to Christianity*. Therefore, to a certain

extent, the Lemba should rather be seen as Christians with Judaising tendencies. But I am particularly interested in these practices and rituals with a specific Old Testament resonance and will focus mainly upon them (cf Chapters Four to Nine). The field study elicited the following questions:

- (i) What role did consciousness of identity play (among Judaising groups in Africa and world-wide) in the process of making a religious shift? And what would the reasons be for such a religious shift?
- (ii) To what extent should the work of the missionaries (and others) and perhaps the way they brought the gospel to Africa, be taken into consideration?
- (iii) Why do the Lemba perceive themselves as being Jewish or Israelite?
- (iv) Did they 'adopt' a form of Judaism and if so, how did it happen? Or are they perhaps really one of the lost tribes of Israel in Africa?

### **Ostensible reasons for 'religious shifts'<sup>9</sup> world-wide**

A variety of reasons could underlie a religious shift as Parfitt (1995:3) has observed it elsewhere in the world and in Africa:

The Judaisation of Himyar may for example best be viewed as a gesture of Yemeni nationalism directed against the encroachments of Ethiopia and Byzantium whereas conversely the adoption of Christianity by the Kiev state was a desire to be united with Byzantium - the cultural Eldorado of the day. In present times the Judaising process at work among the Shinlung can be seen as emanating in part at least from their desire to extricate themselves from their unenviable state as 'tribals' - too lowly even to form part of the Indian caste system. The Judaising activity of the Japanese groups Makuya and Beit Shalom on the other hand may be seen as an attempt to escape the suffocating anonymity of Japanese society. In the case of the Falasha their elaboration of a separate religious tradition formed part of a desire to further buttress existing differences between themselves and neighbouring groups.

Social reasons seem to have been the main motivation for these shifts. Parfitt (1995:3) contends that religious shifts are similar in different regions of the world and are most likely to occur after missionary or other ideological activity, or after the manifestation of some historical reminder of what a given group considers to have been its original religious state. One wonders to what extent the fact that the missionaries first translated and brought the message of the *New Testament* to Africa and only *later* brought the *Old Testament*, should be taken into consideration. This might have given the impression, especially to some tribes in Africa, that the Old Testament is the more important (thicker, number of pages) and therefore some of the tribes eventually rejected (or minimised) the message and customs of the much thinner (therefore less important) New Testament.<sup>10</sup>



The occurrence of a religious shift is often explained as having taken place because of transmitted traditions and as a result of the *choices* that have been made. Parfitt explains that such a movement from one religious system or identification to another, could be brought about by 'sudden conversion or by an almost imperceptible and gradual process' (Parfitt 1995:2). A specific group will often revert to their oral traditions or folklore as resources during a phase of renewal. Choices often involve a well-acknowledged charismatic national or group leader, who carefully weighs the pros and cons of different religions.

Parfitt uses Central Asian (Russian) traditions as an example of free *choice* being exercised, when decisions had to be made between the competing claims of Nestorian Christianity, Islam and Manicheism. In the debate that followed their deliberations, Prince Vladimir first eliminated Islam for obvious reasons. Islam prohibited alcohol - and this he considered unacceptable for the Russian people. Because of the traditional enmity between the Khazar Khanate and Kiev, Judaism was rejected. This left Christianity as the only option.

Because of the strong racial and ethnic character of Judaism, Weingarten points out that most Judaising groups make some attempt to legitimise themselves by claiming that they have always been Jews. The Yemenite Jews insisted that they migrated to South Arabia forty two years before the destruction of the First Temple (approximately 630 BCE). Judaising Japanese sects claim kinship with the lost tribe of Zebulun, who made their way by sea to Japan, bringing with them the Mosaic law. The *bene Israel* of western India (who probably came to Judaism via Islam) claim kinship either with the lost tribes of Israel or with those Jews who left Palestine as a result of the persecutions by Antiochus Epiphanus (165 BCE). The Judaising Shinlung of eastern India, who accepted a kind of Judaism via Protestant Christianity, claim descent from the lost tribe of Manasseh, while the central theory of Falasha origin involves their descent from Solomon and Sheba, although other historical periods and situations are involved as well. 'British Israelism' in Britain insisted that the prophet Jeremiah and the daughter of king Zedekiah (the last Judaeon king) ended up in Ireland after the Babylonian Exile. According to them, she married the Irish monarch, Hermon, who himself was a descendant of Judah.<sup>11</sup> The present monarchy of Britain (said by some to derive from the Hebrew: 'berît ish' = covenant man) are therefore seen by this group as their descendants.

The Lemba cannot recall the particular tribe of Israel from which they have descended, but they regard themselves as an offshoot of Yemenite Jews who left Israel before the Babylonian invasion, crossed the Phusela (but they do not know where or what Phusela is) and came to Africa.

Parfitt (1995:3) explains that groups are sometimes attracted to specific inherent characteristics of an ideology such as Judaism. In certain cases it is the exclusivity of Judaism that exerts a certain fascination; and in other instances the historical experience and



suffering of Jewish people serve as a powerful magnet and as a usable framework to explain and make more bearable their own suffering or to use when their own identity is under siege. This may have been the case with the Dutch (South African) Boers and some Black people when they were suffering at the hands of the British (cf the Manifesto of the Emigrant Farmers, compiled by Piet Retief, 2 February 1837, published in *The Graham's Town Journal*).<sup>12</sup> A specific small right-wing group of Christian Dutch Boers in South Africa were known as 'Jerusalemgangers', since they perceived themselves to be 'the chosen people of God' (without mention of a connection to a specific tribe; De Vaal [s a]a:l) on their way to Jerusalem.

## 'Judaising' movements in Africa

Before introducing the Judaising elements in the Lemba, let us consider this phenomenon in the wider context of Africa. The maritime activities of one specific group, the Sabaeen (Yemenite) Arabs, provide a background. According to folklore, their forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen 'exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple' (as mentioned above; Aharoni 1986:25). In view of the maritime enterprises in the Red Sea by King Solomon and some Judaeen kings, it is not far-fetched to assume that some Judaeans settled in Yemen and eventually in Africa during that early period (cf 1 Ki 10:11-15). Gotein (1969:226) makes it clear, though, that no historical record of such settlement has been found thus far, but their presence (or perhaps that of a later group) is attested for in the centuries immediately preceding Islam by Islamic and Christian literary sources, as well as by local inscriptions in the Himyarite language. According to Goitein these sources also bear witness that the Judaeans in Yemen proselytised vigorously in their adopted country and abroad.

Gayre of Gayre<sup>13</sup> observes that (according to early maritime accounts) the great Semitic maritime power of ancient times, the Sabaeen Arabs, in whose country the Judaeans settled, had been very much involved in settlement and exploitation of the coast of East Africa at the beginning of the seventh century BCE and early in our era. He added that the Yemenites - Jews and Arabs - had been exposed to many different religions. They were, for example, converted from 'heathenism' to Christianity, under which they remained until some time in the fifth century (CE) when they came under the control of a Jewish dynasty. According to Gayre of Gayre, their (the Sabaeen Arabs') very early influence in Ethiopia on language and writing characteristics and also on the Lemba, whose oral tradition indicates that they came across the sea from Yemen to Africa, can clearly be surmised.

The best-known Judaising group in Africa today, are probably the 'Jews' (or 'Black Israelites') in Ethiopia, who from approximately the 1920s were known as the 'Falasha' (cf *Photo 5*) (cf *Map I*). The word Falasha is derived from an ancient Ethiopic, or Ge'ez term, meaning an 'exile' or a 'stranger'. It is not known when it was first introduced. Many Falashas themselves prefer to call themselves *beta Israel* - the house of Israel (cf

Kessler 1982:xiv). In 1985 the Falasha, with their form of Judaism, were rescued from persecution and taken to Israel by the Israeli Government. They are recognised by the Rabbinate of Israel as authentic Jews. Goitein (1969:228) is convinced that the type of religion developed by a foreign population won over to Judaism may best be studied in the Falashas. Their beliefs and practises have very little to do with Judaism.

According to Spurdle & Jenkins (1992; 1996) genetic tests have confirmed that in contrast to the Lemba, the Falasha are not Jewish or Israelites by blood but Ethiopians who made a religious shift. Therefore, the Falasha's claim to be Jewish is not based on genetic tests, as in the case of the Lemba.

Other Judaising groups in Africa include the Aba-yudeyo group in Uganda, the Moyo or Amwenye in Malawi and Maputo, the Ibo in Nigeria, groups in Kenya and others, for example the Berbers in North Africa.<sup>14</sup> The recent 'discovery' of a synagogue in Mozambique might necessitate the rewriting of the history of Jews in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Although the groupings of people who lived in southern Africa before contact with the Europeans had beliefs and practices that by any modern definition were religious, these Europeans tended to report that the Africans had no religions. However, once they had been conquered and dispossessed it was 'discovered' that African people had a God and a religious system after all. It was firmly believed that the subjugation of native people (especially unbelievers) was legitimate. According to Chidester (1996) and Anderson (1983), categorising their religious systems is a European invention.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European colonialists, observers, missionaries and travellers rushed to Southern Africa for various reasons. In the process of identifying the languages and 'superstitions', the manners and customs of the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa, demarcations were drawn around human groupings who came to be designated as 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen', 'Kafirs' and 'Zulus', 'Basutos' and 'Bechuanas'<sup>16</sup> (Chidester 1996:22). We cannot suppose that these terms refer in any unproblematic way to 'natural' groupings of people, who lived in the region prior to contact with Europeans. The terms by which they were identified were probably totally of European invention.

The beliefs and practices of indigenous people were derived from ancient sources, most often identified as from the religion of ancient Israel, since this was familiar to Christian comparativists from their reading of the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> Chidester (1996:22-27) explains how these frontier theorists (comparativists), in order to define unfamiliar African religions, resorted to comparisons with the more familiar religions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as with the ancient religions of Israel, Egypt, Arabia, Greece, Rome and Europe. As Whately (1879:22) observes: '[A]ll savages are degenerated remnants of more civilized races.' In this process of delineating specific African religious systems these theorists, in 'creating' and identifying all the religions of the world, made knowledge available to the indigenous people.



Comparative religion provided further terms for differentiating among local people: the Xhosa were Arabs; the Zulu were the 'Hottentots', the Dutch Boers were Jews and the Sotho-Tswana ancient Egyptians.<sup>18</sup> In this fanciful genealogy of religions, frontier comparative religion was used in ways that both transferred the Middle East onto the southern African landscape and conceptually displayed the indigenous people of Southern Africa to the Middle East.

It seems as though colonialists and others endorsed the idea of linking a Semitic identity with the indigenous people for their own specific needs - they relocated Judaism to southern Africa, as an opposing religion to Christianity. The religions or religious movements in South Africa therefore should be evaluated within a history of the relationships of colonialisation, domination, resistance and recovery.

I will now differentiate in the *Southern African* context, between those groups on whom the idea of Jewishness was either imposed, or those who identified with the concept, because it may have confirmed and reinforced ancient traditions and customs. Groups upon whom the idea of Jewishness was imposed included:

### *The Khoikhoi*<sup>19</sup>

Taking oral tradition as his primary evidence, Kolb, a German visitor to the Cape in 1705, compared the religion of the 'Hottentots' (Khoikhoi) with what was known from written sources about other nations. He calls the 'Hottentots' children of Abraham, who had preserved, in distorted form, religious traditions that could be traced back to ancient Israel. Kolb's comparative method revealed that the Khoikhoi were like Jews, with a religion derived from Abraham. Kolb found grounds for resemblance in:

sacrificial offerings, the regulation of their chief festival by the new and full moon, avoidances between husbands and wives, the abstention from eating certain foods, especially swine flesh, the circumcision of males, and the exclusion of women from full participation in religious ritual. However, the Hottentots lack any memory of the Children of Israel, Moses or the Law (cited in Chidester 1996:51).

Kolb, therefore, proposed that it was more likely that they had descended from the Troglodytes, children of Abraham by his wife, Chetura (= Keturah; Gn 25:1-4) and informed his readers that the religion of the Khoikhoi could be imagined, not as barbaric paganism, but as a variety of Judaism. By emphasising comparisons between the Khoikhoi and Jews, Kolb reinvented Judaism in Christian terms, by relocating it in the Cape as an opposition to Christianity. Two decades later other observers concluded, however, that there was absolutely no common ground between Khoikhoi and Jews and that Kolb was an unreliable witness. However, the social anthropologist Schapera in the 1930s admitted that Kolb's account, 'notoriously inaccurate as it is in many respects, is by far the most detailed and useful' (1934:233).



## *The Zulus*

Shaka, Chief of a small Zulu-speaking Nguni clan, founded the Zulu empire from the Nguni group and other surrounding tribes early in the nineteenth century. Shaka began attacking and establishing his supremacy over his neighbours, with the result that many tribes and groups of people left the country in all directions, never to return. Many smaller groups were totally destroyed or incorporated. An oral tradition holds that the Lala section of the Zulus at the time of Shaka were Lemba people. According to this tradition they were the group who introduced the Zulu to circumcision.<sup>20</sup>

The magistrate and linguist Stuart in 1901 noted that a Zulu philosopher, Mxaba (1839-), referred explicitly to the precedents of ancient Israel and Greece, in order to reconstruct an ancient history of Zulu religion. Mxaba observed that many Zulu customs were held in common with Jews. Both the Zulu and ancient Jews 'slit their earlobes, burned incense in ritual, spread chyme on graves, and burned the bones and divided the meat of sacrificial animals in similar ways' (cited in Webb & Wright 1976:263). Mxaba cited these commonalities as evidence of a prior historical contact between the Zulus and Jews and was convinced that their lineage could be traced back to the lost tribes of Israel. Stuart (cited in 1901, in Webb & Wright 1976:262-263) responded that there were even 'people in England who believed that the British were descended from the same lost tribes'. When Mxaba asked him to elaborate on the correspondence between English and Jewish customs, Stuart was at a loss. Mxaba proceeded to state that the Zulu had forgotten their God, their home, their mother tongue and original religion, but under the influence of Christian mission, however, they would remember. For Mxaba, Zulu religion was recognisable as the same type of religion that had been practised in ancient Israel and he held that Zulu life seems to have been organised on an ancient Israelite pattern. Peppercorne (1852-1853:62-65) characterised this pattern as pre-monarchic, of which the basic form had appeared in ancient Israel. To know more about Zulu religion, he said, one only has to refer to the Hebrew Bible. Relevant knowledge about their religious system was readily available not only by direct observation but also by comparison with the Old Testament.

In the 1820s, Fynn (cited in Stuart & Malcolm 1950:86-88) produced an inventory of the most striking similarities between the religious life of the Zulu and that of ancient Israel:

sin offerings,<sup>21</sup> propitiatory offerings; festival of first fruits; the proportion of the sacrifice given to the Isanusi (or witch doctor, as termed by Europeans), periods of uncleanness, on the decease of relatives and touching the dead; circumcision; rules regarding chastity and the rejection of swine's flesh.

Along the same lines as Fynn, Colenso (1862-1879:9,10) conceded that the Zulu not only provided a model for reconstructing the religion of ancient Israel but felt that they were also a touchstone of universal religion. Thus he proposed a rereading of the Bible

in terms of the patterns and rhythms of African life. Colenso proposed that the Zulu provided a measure against which the scientific or historical accuracy of the Bible could be tested, as well as representing evidence of a more general religion that had appeared in sacred texts and traditions throughout the world. The similarities between the ancient Israelites and the African offered an indispensable tool for interpretation. Customs such as polygamy could for example best be understood by a comparative approach. Colenso was perhaps one of the few scholars of his time who took seriously the problem of the cultural distance between the England of his day and ancient Israel. By 1900 the comparison between the Zulu and Jews had been thoroughly internalised in Zulu reflections upon their own religious heritage.

Isaacs (1836) denied the existence of any religion among the Zulu, while Gardiner found in 1835 a diversity of religious ideas among the Zulu-speaking people. Bleek (1857:205) reported that the Zulu are extremely religious, 'but their religion consists of veneration for the spirits of their ancestors, in particular the souls of their departed chiefs'.

### ***The Sotho-Tswana and the laws of the Old Testament***

With the exception of some Tswana, all the members of this group call themselves baSotho. According to Van Warmelo the Sotho fall into three major sections:

- the South Sotho in Lesotho
- the Western Sotho or Tswana; and
- the remainder in the northeast

The northern and eastern grazing areas of the Kalahari were inhabited by the Sotho-Tswana. They adopted a small village system and were all cattle people. From Tswana traditions, concerning their origins, one gathers that their ancestors arrived from the North in several migrations separated by time.

Only a few reports mentioned in passing apparent similarities between certain Sotho-Tswana customs and 'Mosaic' or 'Levitical' laws of the Old Testament. Many European observers however, speculated that the system of sacred animals and the practice of burying the dead with their faces turned towards the northeast, originated from ancient Egypt (and possibly Abyssinia). Therefore, most reports rather identified the Sotho-Tswana as ancient Egyptians.<sup>22</sup>

### ***The Xhosa: an ancient priesthood***

The Xhosa are described by Soga (1932:130) as a 'group of related tribes', under the heading of the Cape tribes of the Nguni group. A few centuries ago the Xhosa dwelt along the upper reaches of the St Johns River, far to the northeast of their present home.



In 1831 the Glasgow Missionary Society called upon its agents in southern Africa to investigate Xhosa customs with a view to comparing them with the customs of the Jews. However, no one responded.

By analysing their language and customs, missionaries who were also comparative religion theorists, in the Eastern Cape, developed a genealogy for the Xhosa that suggested that they were the Arabs of southern Africa. Other missionaries proposed that Xhosa-speaking people once had a religion, perhaps even a religion based on revelation, but that they had subsequently lost it - African superstition was the trace of a lost religion. According to William Shaw (1860:188,189):

from the absence of any form of ... writing, tradition has merely served to preserve certain outward ceremonies, which have necessitated the perpetuation of a class of persons who are obviously the living representatives of an ancient Priesthood, that was accustomed to celebrate the rites of some old but unknown form of religion.

Sometimes, that higher religion was identified as Islam. Fleming (1853:117), for example, concedes that the Xhosa had maintained beliefs and practices such as sacrifices and circumcision, 'which refer the origin of this people to Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar.' These missionary theorists, of course, were aware of the fact that Muslims were in fact living on the Eastern Cape frontier.

### *The Dutch Boers – ancient Jews*

British reports also consistently applied a particular kind of comparative religion to the Dutch Boers. They identified the phenomenon of the Boers as a kind of frontier Judaism.<sup>23</sup> It was alleged that they lacked genuine religion, like the other indigenous people and they were thus also idolaters. The comparativists observed that the Boers 'had walked straight out of the Old Testament ....', and that they imagined themselves to be the 'chosen people' of God. They concluded that not the Africans but these Boer ancestors of White Afrikaners were the ancient Jews on the northern frontier of southern Africa. According to Chidester (1996:174) the Boers were Christians, but nevertheless preferred the Old to the New Testament. The 'Dutch Boers' or 'Hollandsche Afrikaansche Emigranten', characterised their trek as an 'exodus', away from being British subjects, or being oppressed. The feeling of being a people of the covenant, who were elected by God, became quite entrenched over the years.<sup>24</sup>

One small group of Boers in the 1860s, on the northern frontier, were known specifically as 'Jerusalemgangers' or 'Jerusalemtrekkers', because they thought they were approaching the Holy City.<sup>25</sup> Places like 'Nylstroom' and 'De Nyl Zyn Oog' received their names because it was felt that they were on the way to 'Jerusalem'.



Tangye also declared that the Boers identified with ancient Jews and that 'they take the Old Testament as their only guide' (1896:54,55). However, it is known from other accounts that the Boers were Calvinists who baptised their people (not circumcised) and partook of the holy communion.<sup>26</sup>

Remains of the concept of being Jewish or Israelites were very much alive in the 1920s (cf the Israelites in the eastern Cape, Bulhoek)<sup>27</sup> and are still very much alive today in some small right-wing Afrikaner groups in South Africa and in the Independent Churches of some Black groups such as the so-called African Hebrew community, the Church of God and Saints of Christ, the Zionist Church and the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. The latter's headquarters and temples, near Krugersdorp (Oskraal), for example, are known as Shiloh and Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> All these groups have some Christian connection as well, but perceived themselves as Israelites or Jews. Both religious dogmas were assimilated into their religious experiences and beliefs.

To conclude, none of these groups as a whole (Khoikhoi; Zulus; Sotho-Tswana; Boers or Independent Church groups) currently accept or publicly declare themselves to be Jews or Israelites. Therefore, all the assumptions of yesteryear colonialists and missionaries rested on misunderstanding and unwarranted inferences. It was highly fashionable to append Semitic traditions to indigenous people and the Europeans totally misunderstood the realities of pre-colonial Africa. These societies certainly had valued customs, but their customs were clearly more loosely defined and infinitely flexible – they helped to maintain a sense of identity, but also allowed for adaptation so spontaneous and natural that it was often unperceived. Ranger (1993:248) explained that far from being a single 'tribal' identity,

most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to this chief, at another as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild. These overlapping networks of association and exchange extended over wide areas. Thus the boundaries of the 'tribal' polity and the hierarchies of authority within them did not define conceptual horizons of Africans.

It is a question whether 'tribal' identity really was as dispersed as Ranger describes it.

### *The Lemba and their 'Jewish' identity*

A group in southern Africa who even today regard themselves as Jews or Israelites are the Lemba, to my knowledge the only group in southern Africa who have specific oral traditions that they originally came by boat to Africa.

The Lemba, the so-called 'chosen people' and 'children of Abraham' are also known as the *Varemba* ('people who refuse'), *Basena* ('people coming from Sena'), *Basoni* (a

greeting used by Lemba women), *lamwenye* ('foreigner', 'guest', 'Arab' or 'people of the light'), *Vhalungu* ('Europeans', 'non-Negroes' or 'strangers'), *Mushavi* ('traders'), *Balepa* and perhaps *Mapalakata*. The meaning or origin of all these names is not sure and different explanations have been presented,<sup>29</sup> but each name used for the Lemba is actually telling its own story and already suggests other influences sometime in their past.

The Lemba live among other peoples in southern Africa, mainly in Sekhukhuneland, Venda and the southern parts of Zimbabwe. They speak the language of the groups surrounding them, go to local schools and hold positions in the communities. Their uniqueness, however, lies in that they keep themselves separate from other peoples, regard themselves as an offshoot of the Yemenite Jews, have a religion which stems from Abraham and came from a city called Sena (cf Nh 7:38:16:31). According to their tradition, they centuries ago crossed the Phusela (although they did not know what or where the Phusela was) and came to Africa 'at the back of a tree'. Here they rebuilt Sena – perhaps in more than one place – and helped to construct a great stone city which they identify as Great Zimbabwe,<sup>30</sup> the ruins of which have intrigued archaeologists for at least the last hundred years.

Chidester discusses in detail how comparativists (colonialists, missionaries, travellers) imposed the idea of a Semitic heritage on almost all the indigenous people in southern Africa, but he scarcely refers to the Lemba. However, he does mention that while the Boers were like the ancient Jews on the northern frontier, the Lemba were exceptional, because they were often traced back to an Islamic origin: in the 1850s some Dutch Boers described the Lemba as 'Zlámzie (Islám or Mahometan) Kafirs' between the Soutpansberg and the Blue-berg (Baines 1854:290). Did they escape the speculations about 'Jewishness' by earlier comparativists?

As a matter of fact missionaries and others did have great interest in the manners and customs of the Lemba, but their documents or accounts of the Lemba date from a century later than those of the comparativists, missionaries and colonialists described above. Van Warmelo ([1937]1946:65) points out that the Lemba are strongly suspected of being Semitic in origin. They eat no pork, no animal which has not been *kosher*-killed by slitting the throat and they do not intermarry with the *vhasenzi* (*washenzi*): 'wild folk, or pagans'.

It is curious that the Lemba, who received least attention in Chidester's work and who were described by some as 'Slaamzyn', regard themselves as Israelite (not Islamic) and are the only group in southern Africa today who have very specific oral traditions about their Semitic origins. None of the other groups, recognised or identified by the colonialists as Jewish, chose to identify with the inventions of comparativists or had such traditions. The question is whether the Lemba simply accepted the notions imposed upon other groups; or did they perhaps impose these on themselves? It might also be that they (as mentioned earlier) chose to identify with the idea of being Jewish



or Israelite, because it *confirmed* and *reinforced* the traditions of origin and Semitic customs they already had. For this reason I shall look into their historical and genetic roots, and practices and rituals.

When discussing a number of groups who are attracted to symbolic uses of Judaism, Parfitt (1995:3) refers specifically to the Lemba, whom he regards as having undergone a lengthy process during their religious shift, and who now largely regard themselves as Jewish. The Lemba were probably attracted to the *exclusivity* of Judaism, because it is still one of their own main features. Perhaps the strong sense of ethnic otherness attracted the Lemba to Judaism and reinforced ancient traditions and customs. The Lemba distinguish themselves from others by their customs, traditions, religious practices, features, skills and aloofness (for example endogamy).

Furthermore, Parfitt suggests that the historical experience and suffering of the Jewish people might have been a powerful magnet and useful paradigm to explain and alleviate their own suffering at the hands of the colonialists. He believes that the Lemba or Vairemba (in the former Rhodesia, Zimbabwe) responded to the self-serving interests of European missionaries, colonists and adventurers, and that their interaction with colonialism produced a radically changed view of themselves. According to Parfitt the colonisation of the Lemba heartlands in present-day Zimbabwe depended to a large extent on certain historical issues: It was firmly in the colonial interest to be able to prove that white supremacy was a fact and that subjugation of native peoples was legitimate. Most white settlers believed that the Great Zimbabwe constructions were built by ancient Phoenicians - this theory could help in some sense to legitimise the British presence. The Lemba with their Semitic customs and Judaising habits, fitted this particular historical vision admirably and their identification as Jews (or a Semitic group) thus suited the imperial needs of the British (the Lemba were seen as the descendants of the Phoenicians). If the country could once have been controlled by a small maritime nation, why should it not be controlled now by another small maritime nation?<sup>31</sup>

Parfitt briefly discusses those factors which, according to him, created the ambiguity the Lemba felt about themselves and which created the obvious diversity of their religious traditions. He (1995:4) is convinced that the Lemba seized upon a particular myth - one which was suggested to them - and used it as a means of ridding themselves of a rather ancient ambiguity at a time when in the context of colonial Rhodesia new ambiguities may underline many examples of religious shift.

He adds that 'any confusion the Lemba felt found its antidote in the myth of Jewishness' and that this particular myth was perhaps a means of reflecting on and clarifying the colonial situation.

According to Buijs,<sup>32</sup> empirical evidence has shown that ethnic consciousness is a twentieth-century construct, not a carry-over from the past. She is convinced that the creation of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA)<sup>33</sup> in the forties (1947), for example,

can therefore be viewed 'as a direct reaction to European encroachment on, and aggrandisement of, previously African sources'. She [s a:l] adds that the founding of the association was an attempt, through creating or recreating *a separate and distinct cultural identity* for the Lemba people, to proclaim the value and importance of the Lemba in the Northern Transvaal and at the same time to identify them with a non-African community at a time when European domination in South Africa seemed irreversible (my italics).

This might be true, but some Lemba informants told me that during the years of the Black liberation struggle in South Africa, they kept up their culture but many were not willing to be associated with a non-African (white) race. Precisely for this reason they preferred not to disclose their identity during census recordings and other occasions. This was the main reason why the Lemba were never properly counted. But since the election in 1994 this perception has changed (to a certain extent): they are much more keen to identify themselves as Lemba and not just as another one of their host peoples.

Regarding Parfitt's theory of a possible religious shift among the Lemba: during my field research, I neither got the impression that liberation theology had ever played a pertinent role among the Lemba, nor that they felt threatened by apartheid. On the contrary, for the last few years and after the election their leaders have endeavoured to obtain their own territory. They want to remain exclusive with a view to preserving for posterity what is precious to them.

On more than one occasion, Mathivha, president of the LCA, for example, in his speeches, used the opportunity to advise Afrikaners not just to follow every wind of change, but to maintain their own identity and cultural heritage. He also expressed his appreciation for the role President Paul Kruger played in their history.

Cultural dilution has always posed the greatest threat to them, and still in this new dispensation in South Africa engenders the greatest concern. It thus appears that the Lemba's desire to be associated with Judaism and to maintain a 'separate and distinct cultural identity' is a much wider and profound factor than a mere reaction to colonisation, as Parfitt (1995) suggested or 'a direct reaction to European encroachment' (as suggested by Buijs).

Also, to frame ethnic consciousness as a twentieth-century construct (as Buijs does), is in contradiction to what we have learned from Chidester and others. He explains how colonialists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had already imposed an ethnic consciousness on most indigenous groups in southern Africa, while Weingarten emphasises the strong ethnic character of Judaism to which so many groups were attracted and still are. It seems possible that the political and other situations to which Parfitt and Buijs refer (in the above), as well as activities of missionaries (and others), could have strengthened the Lemba's existing traditions and customs, especially if one takes into account the many old reports and references to the activities by these different groups in Africa.



## Conclusion

Judaising movements are a phenomenon all over the world and very much so in Africa. The interest that missionaries, in particular, and others had in Jews and in the 'mystery of Israel' - an interest which could perhaps be explained because of a particular theological system - led them to infer that the Lemba were Jews or 'Slaamzyn'. But the traditions among Lemba societies - whether invented by the Europeans or by the Lemba themselves in response to those invented by Europeans - distorted the past (as it was before the colonialists came) and became realities through which a good deal of the colonial encounter was expressed. It could also be that the phenomenon of a search for a new or earlier identity by the Lemba was encouraged or reinforced by these comparativists. Clearly, earlier populations and contacts about which we know nothing have left their mark on the people of southern Africa.

Furthermore, similarities between the ancient Israelites and the Old Testament and African tribes should not be neglected. They offer an indispensable tool for interpretation. The functioning of oral traditions and customs such as polygamy, circumcision and sacrifices can possibly be best understood through the use of a comparative approach, but one should take seriously into account the problem of the cultural distance between the modern Bible reader and ancient Israel.

The question of what Judaism could be reduced to, before it stops being Judaism, should be asked again. Ben Gurion, modern Israel's first prime minister, believed that 'a Jew is someone who believes himself to be one'. Maybe by virtue of not knowing exactly where they belong, or to which tribe they belong, so-called Judaising groups, lost tribes or *bene Israel* all over the world will qualify for the 'Thirteenth Gate' one day.<sup>34</sup>

## NOTES

1. Israel 1984; cf Goitein 1969; Connaway 1978; Parfitt 1987:36ff, 88ff.
2. The term 'Judaising' means 'moving towards Judaism', 'Judaic' implies 'a fixed state of Jewishness'.
3. I am greatly indebted to the research done by Parfitt on this subject. Parfitt is professor in Modern Jewish Studies and Chairman of the Middle East Centre at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, who in 1996 became a member of the Centre for Genetic Anthropology at University College, London.
4. Parfitt 1997b:2 The truth of this is most clearly seen when one observes the adoption of Judaism *en masse* in some form or another by peoples, groups or religions. It should therefore be noted that the idea of 'Jewishness' is neither specifically nor exclusively Jewish. Parfitt observes that the phenomenon of Jewishness has been borrowed by various groups and peoples throughout history and made to serve a variety of functions for different reasons. This evokes the question of how 'Judaism' should be defined. 'There is, of course,

- no stable object called Judaism' (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:2), but one possible definition of Judaism is that it is;
5. Parfitt's paper on 'Judaising movements' was read at the joint congress of the Southern African Missiological Society and the research project 'African Initiatives in Christian Mission,' held at Unisa, 13–17 January 1997.
  6. Ellison 1988b:631; Bentwich 1969:59ff.
  7. Parfitt 1997b; 1987.
  8. Whately 1879:22; cf Schapera 1930.
  9. A term (borrowed from linguistics) which indicates 'a movement from one religious system or identification to another, whether it is brought about by sudden conversion, or by an almost imperceptible and gradual process, normally along the slippery axis between poles of similar religious ideologies', is often explained via various kinds of transmitted traditions as a product of choice (Parfitt 1995:2).
  10. Cf Mafico 1979:110; 1982.
  11. Ned. Geref. Kerk van Transvaal, Sektebearbeiding no 17.
  12. E.g. 'we complain of the unjustifiable odium which has been cast upon us by interested and dishonest persons, under the cloak of religion, whose testimony is believed in England to the exclusion of all evidence in our favour; and we can foresee as the result of this prejudice, nothing but the total ruin of the country; ....' and 'we are now quitting the fruitful land of our birth, in which we have suffered enormous losses and continual vexation, and are entering a wild and dangerous territory; but we go with a firm reliance on an all-seeing, just, and merciful Being, whom it will be our endeavour to fear and humbly to obey' (Van Jaarsveld 1971:55).
  13. 1972:88–92.
  14. Price 1954:31ff.
  15. I only heard about this ancient synagogue found on an island in Mozambique (Islede Mozambique) from friends.
  16. The terms denominators *Hottentot*, *Bushman* (and later *Boers*), etc. refer to contemporary usage and are not used in a derogatory sense here (cf Chidester 1996:22). However, designations such as Khoikhoi, 'pastoralists', 'aboriginal hunter-gatherers' or simply 'aborigines' of southern Africa should rather be used (Kruger 1995:212; 257). The term 'Kafir' was used by the Europeans but originally this had been incorporated in Jewish and Muslim discourse. Jews referred to those who denied their 'true' God as *Cofar* or 'unbelievers' and the Muslims identified people who rejected the religion of Islam as *Cofers* or *Caffers* (Chidester 1996:73). Since all Black people's were called 'Kaffirs' by the British this was perhaps a way to distinguish them from 'Hottentots' and 'half-breeds' (Price 1954:32). Thus these terms were initially used by colonialists to 'clarify' specific groups of populations in South Africa; eventually these gained derogatory connotations.
  17. Cf Kolb 1719; Rose 1829; Isaacs 1836; Peppercorne 1852–1853; Colenso 1855; Shaw 1860; Stuart 1901, in Webb & Wright 1976; Schapera [1937]1946; Anderson 1983; Eilberg-Schwartz 1990.
  18. The comparativists could therefore have been responsible for the assimilation of some of the elements of those identities, by indigenous groups (Chidester 1996:240.)



19. The Khoikhoi (= 'Hottentots'; cf Chidester 1996) developed into cattle herders with a loose clan structure. They were mainly migrants who arrived after the San. As long as 2000 years ago they were already roaming the southern parts of Africa. They are a pastoral society with larger entities than the San.
20. Van Warmelo ([1937]1974:58) maintained that the Zulu (and the Venda) do not practice circumcision. Whether his information is correct is not sure, since it differs on this point from the inventory produced by Fynn (already in 1820) and other researchers (cf Van Dyk 1960).
21. Cf G C Oosthuizen 1989. According to him there is no ethical dimension present in indigenous cultures: Sin is and never was an issue among Bantu-speakers. This is of course a debatable statement. Interestingly, the Lemba similarly indicated that they do not have particular sin-offerings.
22. Cf Bryden 1904:127; Casalis 1861:180.
23. Chidester 1996:174.
24. Van Jaarsveld [1957]1959:23,24.
25. De Vaal [s a]:1.
26. Cf the diary of Erasmus Smit 1972.
27. Edgar 1988:1-40.
28. The Rev Tshelane 1999; cf Oosthuizen 1989:333-345.
29. Cf Von Sicard 1952:140,141; Price 1954:33; Ravele 1958:76,77; Hendrickx 1991:174,175.
30. D:J:1; D:O:6; D:G:6; Mullan 1969; Gayre of Gayre 1972; Mathivha 1992.
31. Cf Garlake 1973; Hall 1905:101; Peters 1902:127.
32. Buijs [s a]:1.
33. The Lemba are organised in a national Lemba Cultural Association (LCA). Prof M E R Mathivha (formerly at the University of the North) was the president of the LCA. He has since passed away and has been succeeded by Mr Samuel Moeti as the president of the LCA.
34. 'The twelve of the thirteen gates of Jerusalem correspond to the twelve tribes, through which the prayers of each of them ascend to the heavens .... The thirteenth gate is for him that does not know which is his own tribe' (Dov Ber the *Maggid* of Mezericz, Hasidic leader, d. 1772, in Parfitt 1987).