

CHAPTER THREE

Conflicting accounts of the possible Semitic history and origins of the Lemba

Introduction

This chapter deals with the conflicting accounts of the possible Semitic history and origins of the Lemba. I gathered information from all possible sources (anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, history, genetics and other sources) in order to obtain a more holistic picture of the Lemba. This is not primarily an anthropological study, but the advice of anthropologists was nevertheless gained, wherever possible. Understandably, there has been no general agreement among scholars regarding the origin of the Lemba, but I do not intend to solve that issue at all. The purpose of this background is to be able to show in Chapters Four to Nine (especially in Nine), how oral traditions agree or differ from that which has been written down over the ages, and also the possible influence of the written text on the oral traditions. The background provided by this chapter serves as a measuring rod whereby I can compare the oral traditions and practices of the Lemba discussed in Chapters Four to Nine.

The reconstruction of the prehistory of any tribe in Africa is no easy task and this is very much the case with the Lemba. This task is even more difficult if we accept that 'unnatural' boundaries drawn around human groupings, were most probably the invention of seventeenth and eighteenth century European colonialists, missionaries, travellers and others in southern Africa (and elsewhere). We therefore, have to search in earlier records (than the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries) for references to human groupings other than those invented by comparativists. The earliest available accounts, that in one way or another refer to tribes or groups in Africa, come from maritime undertakings of different (trade or missionary) groups all over the world, mainly the Phoenicians, Arabs and the Portuguese.

Most of the available anthropological, archaeological, genetic and other literature on the Lemba was studied *after* the completion of the field study. In this chapter I shall first discuss the anthropological, archaeological and other accounts. I shall pay special attention to all possible Semitic (Phoenician, Hebrew, Judaistic, Christian or Moslem) connections from this material and to the three different schools of thought regarding possible theories of origin concerning the specific nature of the Semitic culture in-

volved in the origin of the Lemba: One, a pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic origin; two, an Islamic-Arabic origin and three, a Falasha-Abyssinian origin.

Anthropological, archaeological and other accounts of the history and origins of the Lemba

Maritime undertakings between the Semitic world and East Africa and references to possible 'Semitic' groups in Southeast Africa

It has become clear from anthropological and archaeological evidence that Southeast Africa was visited, among others, by Phoenicians, early pre-Islamic Arabic explorers, Indian, Chinese, and even Malay settlers, before the relatively late (approx. 684 CE) arrival of Muslim power¹ in East Africa, which immediately preceded the coming of the Portuguese. Some of the earliest documents on maritime undertakings and trade between the Semitic world (Tyre, Israel and Saba) and Africa are probably the Old Testament (and extra-Biblical) accounts.

According to the Old Testament, it was the *Phoenicians* (or Tyrians) who traded with the Land of Ophir (I Ki 10:11-15; Gn 10:29), from where *King Solomon* (approx 1000 BCE)² drew rich merchandise after he had formed an alliance with Hiram, King of Tyre. Ophir could have been in Southern Arabia, India or even East Africa (Sofala, with their merchants and markets), but it seems certain that the *Phoenicians* (and other Semitic peoples) had circumnavigated Africa from West to East and traded with East Africa at least by 110 BCE (cf *Periplous* [of the Erythraean Sea, first century CE], cited in Landström 1964:52). The fleet of Solomon took three years to return and brought various kinds of items that would be the combined products of the coast of East Africa and of Southern India. Because of the distance it was, nevertheless, impossible to voyage to and from Ophir (if it was India) without making a principal landfall at Sofala. There was of course also an overland route to the South along the Nile, and consequently Ethiopia could have had an interest in the merchandise from 'Rhodesia' and other gold-rich countries in the South. Therefore, at a very early stage, continuing influences between the Semitic world and that of the southeastern parts of Africa had a reciprocal impact on each other.

The Old Testament, similarly, refers to the 'kingdom' of *Saba* from where the famous Queen of Sheba came to visit King Solomon. It is clear that Saba was a rich merchant nation in the gold trade, since Arabia itself is deficient in gold. The *Assyrian Inscriptions* tell us that Teima, Saba and Haipá paid Tiglath Pileser III (733 BCE) tribute in gold, silver and incense; similarly Sargon (715 BCE), Eratosthenes (276-194 BCE), Agatharchides (120 BCE) and Artemidorus (100 BCE) speak of the wealth and greatness of the Sabaeans³ (pre-Islamic Arabians [Yemenites]). According to the *Periplous* the Sabaean colonies were established very early (at the beginning of the seventh century BCE) in Ethiopia, as is proved by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language and writing, as well as by the oral traditions of the Lemba in southern Africa.

Referring to this early dating, Mathivha (1992:1-7) suggests that the 'Jewish' ancestors of the Lemba migrated from 'the North' to Yemen as traders in the 7th century BCE, where they established a large community at a place called Sena (see *Map I*). He says the 'Jewish' community of Sena, termed 'Basena', was expanded by Jews who escaped the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. Here they met Phoenician merchants who introduced them to trading with the Orient and Africa. By 600 BCE trouble was already breaking out between the Basena and the Arabs, which caused some to return to Jerusalem while others left Phusela I and Sena I and crossed the sea into Africa. In concurrence with Mathivha, one of the oldest oral traditions that Junod, the Swiss missionary and scholar, recorded in 1908,⁴ was that the ancestors of the Lemba came to Africa as traders by boat, from a remote place on the other side of the sea. They erected trading posts at different places and each time some of their people were left behind to take charge. They kept themselves separate from the native peoples, but after a war broke out in their country, they could not return and had to take wives from the local peoples, because they did not bring their own wives along.

According to the folklore of Yemenite (Sabaean) 'Jews', their ancient forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen, 'exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple' (Aharoni 1986:25). 'In view of the maritime undertakings of King Solomon and later some of the Judaeans kings in the Red Sea, it is not far-fetched to assume that some Judaeans settled in Yemen in that early period' (Goitein 1969:226). Goitein makes it clear that no historical record of such settlement has been found thus far, but their presence is attested for in the centuries immediately preceding Islam by Islamic and Christian sources, as well as by local inscriptions written in the Himyarite language. These sources also bear witness that the 'Jews' in Yemen were in close contact with their co-religionists in Palestine and that they proselytised vigorously in their adopted country. Goitein stresses that the flourishing Christian elements in Yemen disappeared under Islamic rule, but Judaism stood firm throughout the history of that country.

In Yemen, another oral tradition (which again constitutes a tradition of the Lemba) still exists, namely that a group of 'Jews' left Yemen centuries ago (how long ago is not certain) for Africa, and did not return. In addition, Beeston (1952:16-22) confirms that in *pre-Islamic* times, Judaism was indeed widely practised in the area (Yemen) and that there were Jews in the Hadramaut even after the rise of Islam, such as the famous Jewish noblewomen who rejoiced on the day when Muhammad's death was announced, in 632 CE. Goitein (1969:228) suggests that the Yemenites are 'the most Jewish of all Jews, so that it is rather unlikely that all or even most of them should be the offspring of Himyarites (Yemenites), for Judaism used to be essentially the religion of a people, not one adopted by conversion.' Only after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (a process lasting until 1962) was the whole Jewish community in Yemen repatriated to the newly founded state. They formed a large section of Yemen's *artisans, gold and silversmiths and weavers*, who played a specific role in the economy of the castelike society of

Yemen. According to Goitein, they preserved rabbinical Judaism, to a certain extent, which is familiar 'to the Christian reader from the New Testament', as he puts it (1969:228).

As far as the Christian period is concerned *The Periplous* (first century CE) records that the *Sabaeen* (pre-Islamic-Arabian, from what is now the Yemen) King Kharabit, in CE 35, was in possession of the eastern coast of Africa 'to an indefinite extent' (Bent 1895). The *Sabaeans* (*Yemenites*) were one of the great Semitic maritime powers of ancient times, who must have been involved in any settlement and exploitation of the coast of East Africa. To my mind, this is significant information, since it confirms a very early pre-Islamic Arabic influence in East Africa. Putting aside the earlier Hebrew influences in Saba, in our era the Sabaeans' widespread commerce brought them into contact with both Christianity and Judaism. Gayre of Gayre explains that (1972:89)

they were converted to Christianity under Constantius II by the Indian Theophilus, but another account credits this event to the reign of Anastasius (491-518 CE). Their ruler Dhú Nuwás became converted to Judaism, and from this event Ethiopia was led to invade the Yemen. This weakened both Christianity and Judaism and opened the way for conversion to Islam of the Arabian peoples.

The last Himyarite ('Homeritic') king, King Dhú Nuwás (who had become Jewish), was notorious for his persecution and massacre of the *Christians*, which already in 399 CE led to the termination of his reign and the invasion by Ethiopians on behalf of their Christian brothers.⁵ In turn, the Jewish (and Judaised) Arabs were persecuted by the Christians and after several conquests and resultant pressure to migrate, they left for the Himyarite colonies in East Africa and Mashonaland (present-day Zimbabwe), in ships, of which their merchants had plenty. The Persian conquest of Southwest Arabia, only at the end of the sixth century (CE), made it possible for the proselytisation by Islam of Yemen (Saba). The groups who left for Africa were *not Muslim*.⁶

The Sabaeans most probably could have been the pioneers of Arab influence as far south as Mozambique, *before the arrival of later Islamic Arabs*. Therefore, it could have been possible for a group such as the Yemenite Jews to become involved in this way in Africa and eventually to establish themselves here. We may expect that wherever the Sabaeans settled, even when they were Judaised or Christianised, some elements of their 'original' Arabian religious concepts (based upon Attar or Vénus and Almaqah or Sin, the moon god) would always be evident, in some way or another. We may also expect that from the time that the Semites first made contact with the coast of East Africa, both cultural mixing and genetic miscegenation could have taken place with the native populations.⁷ It seems clear in any case, that influences of religions such as Judaism and Christianity were operative in Africa, long before that of Islam.

Another piece of information about 'immigrations' to Africa from the Semitic world comes from the reports of the historian, Josephus', 'Jewish Antiquities'.⁸ According to him the Jewish high priest, Onias IV, was persecuted by Herod Antipas in Palestine and

fled to Ptolemaeus Philometor in Egypt c 172/168 BCE. He settled in Heliopolis and obtained permission from the Egyptian ruler to build a temple in Leontopolis, like the one in Jerusalem, not far from Heliopolis. There he appointed priests and Levites who followed him to Egypt. Later in c 107-102 BCE, Cleopatra, the wife of Ptolemaeus Philometor, employed Chelkias and Ananias, the sons of the high priest Onias, as generals in the army. Josephus further reports that there were many Jews living in the district at that stage. At Memphis Onias protested against Herod Antipas and convinced them of his evil ways.

Josephus furthermore refers to a city called Lemba (ANT 13.15.4). Great was my amazement when a friend from New York, Dr Wapnick, made me aware of the fact that there is indeed, in the ordinary 'Macmillan's Bible Atlas', through which I have worked so many times, a city called Lemba indicated on an ancient map of Moab (cf *Map III*).

A further important source of information is the records or accounts of Arab historians and traders. Marco Polo, the twelfth century (CE) Venetian writer and explorer, made it his business to learn something about East Africa and used mainly these much earlier Arab sources. Polo's account again confirms that not only the *Arabs*, but also many other nations were involved in the east coast of Africa from very early times. Significant though, is that Arab travellers and writers actually recorded their visits and accounts of the east coast from Mombassa and Kilwa southwards to Sofala (at the Zambezi; see *Map II*).

It was only in 943 CE that one of the Arab historians, Masudi, wrote that the *Muslims* of Oman in Arabia, of the Al-Azd tribe, sailed on the Zang, Zing, Zeng or Negro Sea (Indian Ocean) as far south as Madagascar and to Sofala (Sufalah) in the land of the Wak-Wak (Khoisan, either 'Bushmen' or 'Hottentots'). Kenyon (cited in Mullan 1969:136) tells us that the *first* Arab refugee settlement on the East African coast was in 684 CE and that they were the descendants of *immigrants from Yemen*. Kenyon apparently neglects the much earlier *pre-Islamic* Arabian (Sabaean or Yemenite) involvement and influence in Southeast Africa.

It is also known that in the year 696 CE the two princes of Oman, Sulaimân, and Sa'îd, were attacked by the forces of the Khalif Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan of Damascus and forced to flee to the Land of Zanj (East Africa). There we also find the tradition of the coming of the Arabs who settled along the coast and that the name of their chief was Haji Sa'îd.

There is every reason to believe that the above-mentioned earlier immigrants from (pre-Islamic) Yemen would soon have associated with those Muslim refugees (newcomers; followers of Zaid⁹ or Sa'îd from Yemen) on the coast of Africa, so that soon there would have been no apparent differences between the two groups and that they would merely be described by historians and missionaries as 'Moorish' people. Although the two groups (if they could be identified as such) apparently shared much in common con-

cerning their outward appearance and practices, this does not mean that religious differences could not have existed between them.

Gayre of Gayre (1972:35) states that between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, the Bantu Zenj had displaced the Khoisan Wak-Wak people in the district of Sofala. That the term 'Zenj' or 'Zang' was used at that stage by the Arabs for the Muslim Negroes or more specifically the Swahili-speaking coast peoples, is of some significance. Masudi also uses a similar word, *Zindji*, to refer to the aborigines of Central Africa.¹⁰ Stayt observes that after 1 000 years, the Lemba preserved this word with the same meaning and the same disdain (as the Arabs): They call their own women and other peoples, *Vhazhenzhi*¹¹ (*Gentiles*) because they say they came to Africa without wives and had to marry the local people.

Masudi tells us the important fact that Sofala, from which much gold was brought, was inhabited by a tribe of *Abyssinians* who had emigrated there *recently*, and whose king, the Wāklimi, had his capital there (in Theal [1898-1903]1964b). Caton-Thompson found that in the original Arabic text of Masudi, no such word as 'recently' occurs, which leaves the period to which he refers, completely in the air (cited in Mullan 1969:134). Many centuries later the Dominican friar, Dos Santos (1609), who spent four years in Sofala, observes however that the Monomotapa¹² and his people, in many respects resembled the Abyssinians. They celebrated a festival called 'Pemberar' which very much resembled the 'Toscar' of the Falashas (Abyssinians). This, in fact, seems to be the only resemblance between the two groups.

Wilmot (1896) collected information from letters of early *Portuguese missionaries* preserved in the archives in Rome. Those sources tell us that 'Abou-Feid Hassn, who lived in the tenth century, wrote a book supposed to contain an account of the travels of a merchant Soleyman who describes the country of "Zenj" ' and elsewhere [d]e Bānos, the Portuguese writer, reproduces from Arab Chronicles information respecting the foundation of several towns and the character of their inhabitants. From this source we learn that a great number of Arabs emigrated in three ships under the command of seven brothers who fled from the persecutions of the Sultan of Bahharin. The first city they found in Africa was Magadaxo (Moguedchou [sic]), afterwards that of Braoua, which was still, on the arrival of the Portuguese, ruled in the manner of a republic by twelve chiefs who were the descendants of the seven brothers just alluded to They subsequently formed a mixed population intermediate between the Arabs and the Kaffirs. It was the people of Magadaxo who with their ships first reached the country of Sofala and commercially exploited the gold mines of the region (Wilmot 1896:111,107-8).

Wilmot (1896:110) supposes that 'Moguedchou [sic] was founded about 930 years after Christ, and there seems little doubt that the political establishment of Arabs at Sofala can be shown to have taken place about 1100 AD.' According to Gregson (1973:418) 'another documentary source places *Muslims* in Ibo Island north of Moçambique Is-

land in c. AD 771.' This is apparently still much later than the pre-Islamic Arab and Christian groups who came to Africa.

Returning to the land of Ophir, it was a firm Arab tradition that Ophir (cf I Ki 10:11-15) might well have been situated along the East African coast. Thomas Lopez reported (1502) about Sofala that

the Moorish merchants were telling us that in Sofala there is a wonderfully rich mine to which, as they find in their books, King Solomon used to send every three years to draw an infinite quantity of gold (Von Sicard 1955:67).

Because of the many influences and much immigration of Semitic groups to Southeast Africa, it is in no way clear who the 'Moorish merchants' referred to here, were. Did they come from the early immigrants from the Middle East or from the Islamic Arabians or were they perhaps a combination of the two groups? Moreover, the question is 'who linked the mines of Sofala with the story of King Solomon?' and whether this was merely transmitted from generation to generation. If it were not for the reports of the Arabian and Portuguese seafarers, these oral traditions would apparently have been lost.

This same tradition is repeated by the Portuguese missionary, João dos Santos (1609), who lived and worked among the people of Sofala (cf *Map II*). He added that some old Moors narrate that the ruins on top of the mountains were in older times the trading depots of the Queen of Sheba (*Saba*) and that from this place a great quantity of gold was brought to her.¹³ A farmer from Zimbabwe told me recently that there are still treasures, received from the Queen of Sheba, hidden in a cave in that area.

The Arabs used the name Sofala not only for the town of that name, but also for the whole region between the Zambezi and the Limpopo. And the region behind Sofala was known to the Arabs as 'Saba', which is the same as Sheba, the historical name of what is now Yemen.¹⁴

The late Wilfred Phophi's story concerning the origin of the Lemba differs from that told by Mathivha and links up with the preceding traditions. According to him,

Solomon sent his ships to get gold from Ophir, that is Zimbabwe. Some of the Jews who went on those boats stayed in Africa. That is the origin of the Lemba. Our name means 'those who avoid eating with others'. That means Jews. The others we did not eat with were the wasenzhi. That means gentiles. And for all this gen [sic] do not think that I am relying on the dictum of old Mathivha. My father could read and write. I got it all from him. He told me things that Mathivha will never know (cited in Parfitt 1992:48).

As already stated above, Dos Santos and Senhor Ferão (1609) found many Christian and many (not clearly defined) 'Moorish' people at Sofala and Sena at the Zambezi (and in other places). Dos Santos mentions specifically that the Moors had their own kings (Mambos)¹⁵ but most of them were killed upon the entrance of the Portuguese to these lands. Ferão says they were mainly *merchants*, the woman manufactured *earthenware*, *cultivated rice* and *distinguished themselves* from the other inhabitants by refraining from eating pork and rejecting meat that was not killed by the hands of one of their sects (cited in Theal [1898-1903]1964d:371). Dos Santos adds that further inland,

these lands belong to the Monomotapa. They are inhabited by heathen Kaffirs and Moors, some black, some white, some of whom are rich, although they are the subjects of Monomotapa they live there almost independent, being at a great distance from the court of the king

And elsewhere (cited in Theal [1898-1903]1964d:330) he writes:

they are barbarians and very fond of wine, and are only Moors in name and in the practice of circumcision, and neither know nor keep the creed of Mohammed that they profess. The principal observance, in which they are most exact, is celebrating, with great feasting, every new moon, upon which occasion they usually get intoxicated - although their creed forbids them to take wine [my italics].

It is probable that there were very early (from the 7th century BCE to the 7th century CE) Phoenician, Hebrew and Sabaean activities on the east coast of Africa. In contrast the commercial and other activities on the east coast of the Islamic Arabs only commenced during the 7th or 8th centuries (CE).

According to the various sources it is also possible that by the sixteenth century, there was already a substantial degree of purely African custom in 'Moorish' religious and social practices. Who those 'Moorish' people were is not clear. Nevertheless, prominent characteristics of those 'Moorish' people were that they came as merchants to Africa, already possessed skills as goldsmiths, potters and cultivators of rice, distinguished themselves from the people of Africa by referring to them as the *vhazendji* (heathen), practised circumcision, celebrated the feast of the new moon and practised *kosher* slaughter and eating habits. Furthermore, they were 'Moors' (Muslim) only in name, and neither kept nor knew the law of Mohammed. This information largely concurs with oral traditions as well as customs which are still found today in traditional communities of the Lemba.

Accounts of the history of the Lemba north of the Limpopo

Nothing precise is known of the history of the Lemba north of the Limpopo, or even of the Lemba in the former Rhodesia and we have to rely heavily on oral traditions. Oral

traditions do not provide us with chronology and for the purpose of historiography it is, therefore, very difficult to discern between the history of the Vãremba in Rhodesia and of those in the Soutpansberg area. Because they were traders who moved around a great deal, it is even more difficult to determine where and when they lived.

Among most clans of original Lemba stock, the tradition is to be found in various forms, that they reached their present home from across the Limpopo, but that in the remote past they crossed the 'Phusela', from a place called Sena (cf *Map II*).

In his 'Ein Reise-Jahr in Süd-Afrika' Wangemann (1868:437) collected several oral traditions on the origin of the Lemba and observed their most important customs. He reported that the Lemba

sagen, sie haben bei dem Flusse Loathe früher gewohnt, bei den Portugiesen, sie nennen sich Banyai-Bachalaka ... ihre Väter seien grosse Könige gewesen und haben masila (gemachte Kleider) getragen Sie haben neben Moselekazzi am Zambezi früher gewohnt.

(they say, that before they lived at the River Loathe, with the Portuguese, they call themselves the Banyai-Bachalaka ... their fathers were great kings and wore masila (fabricated clothes) Earlier they lived next to Moselekazzi at the Zambezi [my translation]).

This tradition is closely related to what some old Balemba of both the Spelonken and the Modjadji country later told Junod (1908:277; see *Map II*):

[We] have come from a very remote place, on the other side of the Phusela [but they do not know where Phusela was]. We were on a big boat. A terrible storm nearly destroyed us all. The boat was broken into two pieces. One half of us reached the shores of this country; the others were taken away with the second half of the boat, and we do not know where they are now.¹⁶ We climbed the mountains and arrived among the Banyai. There we settled, and after a time we moved southwards to the Transvaal; but we are not Banyai [my insertion and endnote].

With the assistance of the Lemba Phophi (in the Soutpansberg area), Van Warmelo 1966:273-283) recorded similarly that the Lemba came from a remote place on the other side of the sea, but the informant added 'that they had come to Africa as traders'.¹⁷ They were in search of gold and after each trading expedition they went back to their country by the sea. They could not remember the name of their country but they were masters of *iron and copper-smelting*. In their country they made *pots*, grew and wove *cotton* and were also masters of *timber-work*, because they had to build their own ships for their maritime undertakings (Van Warmelo 1966:273-283).

At different places in Africa they erected trading depots and left some of their people behind to take charge. They did, however, keep themselves separate from the native peoples because they felt themselves to be *superior*. Then something bad happened in their country of origin - a war broke out and they (the šavi [traders]) could not return. Because they did not bring wives along, they now had to take wives from the Rozwi, Karanga, Zezuru and Govera tribes. The above mentioned traditions still exist among the Lemba today.

I have already mentioned the possibility that the first pre-Islamic immigrants from the Yemen were related to the Mohammedan refugees who came much later to the east coast of Africa (followers of Zaid and Suleiman from Yemen in 684 CE) or the other way round. Whereas the leader of the Emozaïd-Arabs (the Ameer)¹⁸ had his residence at Sena, Sena¹⁹ seems to be the place where the intermarriages between the locals and the Arabs (or Judaic-Arabs) from Yemen could have taken place. This could be the birth-place of the first real Lemba as we know them today.²⁰

An old Lemba praise song collected by Stayt (1931:237) also reflects something about their past: *Nemanga vhazungu vha no senna, vha no vha mbila ya sose* ('master of the monkey nuts, white men who come from Sena, who come from the place of the rock rabbits at Sose'). How old this song is, is not known, but Stayt explains that Sose is a place near Sena on the Zambezi. According to Idrisi ([circa 1150] cited in Mullan 1969:73-76), the Senzi (Zanji people - possessors of the *ngoma lungundu*) were forced from their territory and down into the Sena area (at the Zambezi). These people of the magic drum, calling themselves the BaSenzi (probably the Venda), became closely associated with the Lemba in the same area (cf Wentzel 1983).

Mullan (1969:73-76) comes to the conclusion that possible pressure from Malawi caused these two groups (the Vhasenzi and the Lemba under Mposi) to move away from Sena and after a period of residence among the Banyai (according to their tradition) they possibly made their way into the Butwa-Torwa Kingdom, to Buhwa (Vhuxwa), 'the place of dying', a hill in the Belingwe district (Southern Zimbabwe; approx 1600). It seems to me that a mixing of traditions took place as far as the origin of the Lemba is concerned. Hundreds of years or even a thousand could have elapsed between the oldest historical core of a tradition and the next.

According to Mullan many Lemba from the Butwa-Torwa Kingdom died in wars against the Karanga (the people of Mambo) between 1493 and 1497. Close links of the Lemba to groups such as the Rozwi, Venda, Shona and Karanga continually appear in their oral traditions, but the relationships are not always very clear. According to Möller-Malan (1953:1), 'Mambo' means 'king' and 'god' and the people of Mambo are the same as the Vhasenzi (Venda). The sacred drum (*ngoma lungundu*; cf **Photo 6**), carried by the Lemba for the Vhasenzi, was called: 'The voice of the great god, *Mambo wa denga*, king of heaven! He was also called Mutumbuka-Vhathu, the creator of man' (1953:1).



Photo 6 'The sacred drum' (*ngomo lungundu*) by artist, Magoro (from the UNISA art collection)

The tradition continues that at Buhwa, many royal marriages took place between the Venda (Vhasendzi) and the Karanga from which two important leaders were born – Rozwi and Vele Lambeho. Rozwi became the leader of the Rozwi tribe and Vele Lambeho the leader of the Venda. Mullan mentions that in 1893 the Rozwi defeated the Karanga, only to be defeated later by the Venda and the Lemba. According to Fage & Oliver (1970:169,196) the Rozwi were defeated in 1834 by the Nguni under Chief Zwangendaba and their remnants were absorbed in other tribes. They also maintain that the Venda are of Rozwi origin. If that is so, how could the Venda have defeated the Rozwi then? Van Dyk (1960:1,2) refers to the influence of the Lala section of the Zulu tribe (Ngunis) on the latter, while Mathivha is of the opinion that this Lala section were Lemba people,

which means that the Lemba could have been in close contact with the Nguni or Zulu somewhere in their past.

A tradition recorded by Motenda, Marole and others, states that the ruler of the Lemba at that stage, Mulembe/Mulambe - a Vha-Kalanga induna - had his residence on the Belingwe Hill. One of the names the Lemba call themselves by, is 'the Good Men' and they usually refer to their sacred mountain as the 'Belingwe of the Good People' or 'the mountain of the Good Men'. Parfitt found that an area not far from Sena (on the Zambezi), in the vicinity of Cape Correntes (cf *Map II*), had indeed been named by Vasco da Gama 'the land of the Good People' - *Terra da Boa Gente*.

According to the tradition, Mulembe and his people traded from one place to another and later were given the name of *mushavi* ('traders'). After his death Mulembe was succeeded by his son, Ngwedzi and the latter was again succeeded by Shambani. The Lemba mainly became famous for their *medicine* and the *magic power* they had over their enemies. The tradition holds that they, unfortunately, lost their secret weapon (potion) and power when a Rozwi married a Lemba girl and encouraged her to steal the magic potion for her husband. After this, the Lemba were defeated by the Rozwi and moved away to the Nzelele Valley with Thoho-ya-Ndou (leader of the Venda; Soutpansberg; cf *Map II*).

Another rendering of their history records that Nkalahonye Mulembe, son of a Karanga induna, among other young men from Mashonaland, went to look for work at Great Zimbabwe, when it was still under the control of Jewish and Arab gold diggers.²¹ Nkalahonye was hired to work in the kitchen of an Arab and although they liked him, he still had to be circumcised in order to be allowed to cook for them. After he was circumcised (in private), he was much more in demand among the Arabs. Later he married one of the Arab (Moslem or Jewish?) women, kept their customs and circumcised his own sons according to the *Palestinian* law.²² It might be of some significance that Nkalahonye kept the customs of the 'Arabs' and circumcised his sons according to the 'Palestinian' law. And again that he learned the new moon celebration and the circumcision from the Arabs and the Jews in Zimbabwe. It is true that some of the customs of the Arabs and those of the Jews are so closely related, that it could have been very difficult to discern between the customs of those two groups.

Many other prohibitions, similar to those of the 'Arabians and the Jews of Jerusalem', observed by Nkalahonye were recorded by Marole (1969:3). Probably when the work at 'the mines of King Solomon' stopped, the Arabs and those who came from 'Palestine' returned. Nkalahonye and his married sons Mbelengwa, Tanganalo, Sadiki, Mposi and Mpilo (Marole also adds Bakali) remained and traded mainly with arm-, leg- and ear-rings.

Nkalahonye went through the country trading and reached a certain tribe called the Vhasia. The tradition proceeds to say that the Vhasia are people who keep their water clean by putting it in new dishes. When they expect the new moon they will stay

watching the water in the dish during the day so that they can see the new moon before any other person.

Nkalahonye was very old when he died (no date is given) and was succeeded by his son Mbelengwa, who settled at the Dumbwi/Dumbghe Mountain (Belingwe district; cf *Photo 7*). Mountains play/ed a very important role in the history and in the lives of the Lemba people at present. Mbelengwa (the son of Nkalahonye) in turn built a big village next to this mountain - 'then the mountain was also called Mbelengwa till today' (Marole 1969:4).



Photo 7 *Dumbghe Mountain in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe*

During their stay at their stronghold Dumbghe, Dyke Neuk (1923:51-54) recorded a few Lemba traditions. Once again the lack of dating makes it difficult to fit in the chronology, but according to these traditions the Vãremba lived close to the Wamali tribe at the time when Mzilikazi (Nguni; Zulus) ruled over Mashonaland. The Lemba informant recalls that one night the Vãremba were attacked by the Madumbuseya tribe under the leadership of Mpapuri. Nearly everyone was killed but Mposi and the remnants fled to the land of the Vhavezha or Vhavenda, south of the Limpopo river.

Stayt (1931:232) points out that during the reign of the Venda chief Ramapulana (or Ramabulana) there were extensive Lemba settlements in the western part of Vendaland and that his son Makhado (who died in 1899) gave them *Ndouvhada* near Waterpoort

where they called their mountain Tshilimani. Other large groups settled in the east of Vendaland and Tshinapfene, near Sibasa in the Soutpansberg. Later they wanted to return to their Dumbghe stronghold so much that they decided to request Mzilikazi's assistance. The only reason he helped them, was their knowledge of medicine and witchcraft. So the king gave his consent that some of his Godhlwayo (warriors) might accompany the Varembe to Dumbghe. They defeated Mparuri and his men and some of the Varembe were again able to live at Dumbghe under Mposi, until today.

In a study on Islam in Africa, Price (1954:32-36) refers to the Mwenye (whom the Africans call Balemba) as depressed and broken tribes, scattered among the Mashona (a mighty nation before the Matabele overran them). According to Price several observers note especially their *Semitic physical features* and the fact that they do conduct the 'non-Bantu' practice of male circumcision of infants:

the Mwenye profession of Islam depends on the observed food tabus, the circumcision of male infants denoted simply by mwambo waana wathu - 'our custom with regard to children' They do not have the Qur' n or any system of instruction in orally transmitted texts, they do not keep ritual observances of the day or the week, nor the fast of Ramadan. They in fact appear to be very thorough-going materialists at their present stage, lacking serious interest in either the beliefs of their fathers or the religions of the people they have come among. They are aware ... of the existence of the powerful Yao Islamic community not far north, but they have made no attempt to join it or to associate with the ... groups. The msikiti or mosque is a feature of Yao villages, but the Mwenye have none, and take no trouble to assemble as a religious community (Price 1954:33-35).

The facts that there are hardly any oral traditions among the Lemba referring to a Muslim history or connection; that in general they have no significant exclusively Muslim practices or interest in their beliefs are, as far as I can judge, important. The Mwenye group did not associate with the local 'beliefs of their fathers' – a very peculiar phenomenon for an 'African' people – neither did they make any attempt to join or to associate with the Muslim groups. This leads to the conclusion that this group of people were confused. The fact that they clung to their food taboos and the circumcision of their *male infants* may be of significance and earlier observers overlooked or misjudged this. It may also be that Price's conclusion indicates the result of the lack of contact which the Mwenye perhaps previously enjoyed with Semitic, Arabian and Jewish groups (as referred to in the tradition recorded by Marole).²³

Accounts of the history of the Lemba south of the Limpopo

In what follows I shall try to give, more or less in chronological order, the accounts of different writers on the Lemba south of the Limpopo. This however, does not necessarily reflect a chronological history of the Lemba.

The earliest mention of the Lemba name, the 'Walembers,' is most probably in 1721 and 1726, in the Dutch East India Company's reports on the conditions in the interior. This constitutes the first reference in modern times to the presence of this people south of the Limpopo. A further report made by 'a negro', Mahumane, for the Dutch at Delagoa Bay in 1728, again refers to the 'Walembers' in the vicinity of the Zoutpansberg as being *traders* and a *separate* people. These two traits very often come to the fore in accounts on the Lemba and in the oral traditions of the Lemba themselves - even when other groups refer to the Lemba.

Mahumane was from the chiefdom of Mpfumo near the Dutch trading factory who had visited the Venda 'king' in 1727/28 and who gave the Dutch important information they needed (Liesegang 1977). This report was transcribed by the head of the Dutch trading station, J van de Capelle (cf Sutherland-Harris 1970).

The account of Mahumane shows that from the early eighteenth to the second half of the nineteenth centuries, cultural and political changes occurred, which influenced the identification of groups by outsiders and to some extent also their self-identification. Liesegang published Mahumane's report on the first trading partners of the Dutch from the small states bordering Delagoa Bay:

[T]hese traders were from 'Sanguano' (Hlanganu area), 'Inthowelle, Paraotte, Machicosje, Walembe and Chiremandelle' The Walembers, who are always coming here with those of Inthowelle,... are a nation which lives on top [north] of the country of Inthowelle The aforementioned Walembe was said to be rich in gold too, and this nation was also doing trade with the Portuguese in the direction of the aforementioned Sena and Manica ... (Liesegang 1977:166,171).

The only historical reference in Mahumane's report is to the emigration of the Lemba from the area north of the Limpopo. This account further shows that there is no reason to doubt oral traditions referring to the Lemba as a separate group or as traders north of the Limpopo and in the Zoutpansberg area. Oral traditions do not provide us with a firm chronology regarding their movements between the North and the South, but to my knowledge, Mahumane's account provides (except for that of the Dutch reports) the first modern (literary) evidence of this group of people and he was also the first to identify them by name, as some scholars have indicated.²⁴ Parfitt (1992:253) finds it interesting that the 'Walembers' in Mahumane's report are 'described neither as Muslim nor as Moors ... but simply as a wealthy nation which had been defeated in battle at some time in the past.'

Historically, we can at least trace the name and presence of the Lemba in the Transvaal-Belingwe (Mberengwa) regions, based on Mahumane's report, back to the 18th century. Loubser²⁵ indicates that it can be established that the Lemba arrived in the Transvaal in approximately 1790.

Yet another source confirms the much earlier identification of the Lemba (this time again north of the Limpopo). In the personal notes of the late Dr de Váal, which were donated to the University of Venda, I found the following information:

In his search for gold (and other things) for an Austrian agency, William Bolts (1777) reports to Mr Andrew Daniel Pollet, agent for 'their Imperial Majesties' (sic) in Mcafũmo River, that

[t]he Natives of this part seem to have no knowledge of gold ... But as the River of Maneefs [Manees?] traverses an immense track on the back of Sofála a people called Malembe resort to this place at stated periods from a country that way, said to be several weeks journey from hence ... on diligent inquiries from these people, who must necessarily have had some communication with the distant Inland factories of the Portuguese, we may be able to trace that precious metal I have some suspicion that these people come from the country called Manica [Manyika?] in the old books, concerning whom, Purchass, in his *Pilgrimes*, (printed 1537) records many curious particulars ... some of which I have selected for that purpose, as follows In Manica they have smiths who make spades, hatches etc and weavers who make cotton cloths ... (Bolts 1777:6; [my insertion]).

Commenting on the Austrian's presence in Zimbabwe, Punt (1975:26,27) indicates that Bolts reported in one of his letters to the authorities in Vienna about a big and important city called Zimbabwe, where gold was mined and gold articles were manufactured by a tribe known as the Balembe. From these letters by Bolts it is further clear that the Lemba lived in the hinterland of Sofala (which included the vicinity in which Zimbabwe and Belingwe was located) in 1777 and most probably had done so even before that time (1537; cf *Map II*).²⁶

To return to their stay south of the Limpopo, in the early 1850s, Thomas Baines had heard of gold among the '*Slaamzyn* (Islaams or Mahomedan) Kafirs',²⁷ between the Zoutpansberg and the Blueberg. In 1899 Flygare added that

[m]idden tussen de Bawenda in woont de kleine verachte stam der Balembe. Zy verschillen geheel met deze in voorkomen, taal, gewoonten en godsdienst. Hun geschiedenis en oorsprong blyft een geheim Hun nederzettingen vindt men hoofdzakelik in het noorden en noordoosten. Zy houden zich geheel afgezonderd van de Bawenda en hebben geheel afgescheiden godsdienstgewoonten die wyzen op enig verband en verwantschap met Semitiese volken [:6].

(The Balembe, a small despised tribe, lived among the Bawenda. They completely differed in appearance and language, customs and religion. Their history and origins remain a secret One finds their settlements mainly in the North and North-east. They kept themselves completely separate from the Bawenda and had com-

pletely different religious customs, which indicate in some way connections and relatedness with the Semitic nations [my translation]).

It is significant that Flygare also mentions the *separateness* and *Semitically related religious practices* and *appearance* of the Lemba.

In the meantime, the occupation of both the Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia by the British made it possible for ethno-historians and others to study the so-called 'Islamic Kafirs' more closely. It was only by the end of the 19th century that Anderson (1887:144), who travelled to the old Mutapa Empire, could write: 'The natives state that the gold was worked and the forts built by the *white men* that once occupied this country whom they call *Abberlomba* (men who made everything),²⁸ and there is every appearance that it is so ...' [my italics]. Later, he reported about *broken tribes* (clearly not Islamic) who flourished mainly among the Venda and the Shona:

[W]ere these Monomotapa people black or white, and from whence did they come? They were evidently a separate people from those who now occupy the country. May not an Arab tribe have passed down along the east coast, and established themselves in the Mashona region ...? ... for the word Emperor is not a word used by any African races south of the Zambezi ... except they are of Arab blood, or closely connected with that race. There is at present that tribe ... to the north of my explorations ... may not this remnant be descendants of the Monomotapa people, and those the Mashonas call 'Abberlomba'? (Anderson 1888:384).

The German explorer Mauch (cited in Parfitt 1992:80), credited with the 'discovery' of Great Zimbabwe, noted that, 'It is firmly believed that in former times white men had lived in this area ...' Parfitt is of the opinion that Anderson's Abberlomba are Lemba and that Mauch's White men could also be Lemba. This leads Parfitt to the conclusion that at the beginning of the twentieth century at least the Lemba were still called *valungu* - white men, which also means: 'spirits of the dead' or even 'gods' (Parfitt 1992:80).

Numerous scholars (cf Van Warmelo 1935; De Vaal 1947; 1958; Mullan 1969; Gayre of Gayre 1972; Mathivha 1992) and the Lemba themselves connect the Lemba in one way or another to the building of Great Zimbabwe. Motenda-Mbelingwa (1958:62) explains the Lemba meaning for the name 'Zimbabwe': *Dzimba*=houses; *Mabwe*=stones. Therefore, the name should be: *Dzimba-Mabwe*, 'houses of stones' (cf **Photo 8**). According to him the first Europeans were unable to pronounce both names properly together, so they said: '*Zimbabwe*'. Mathivha records that at a specific stage in their history (300-200 BCE) the Basena were guided to a particular place by a star. Here on top of a hill they built a fort and a place of worship. The Tovhakale, Tovakale or Thobakgale lineage were especially famous for their stone masonry. In fact, the name is *Nhovele wa kare*, *Thovhela-wa-kale* or *Thobela-wa-kgale*, which is 'king of long ago'. Tovakare is also called 'Makudo-a-Zimbabwe', which means that the Tovakare men 'climbed the walls like monkeys or baboons when they were building the walls.'

Summers (cited in Mullan 1969:9) comments about the Lemba as possible Zimbabwean builders that [t]he Lemba have undoubted connections with the Arabs and they may well have inherited some of the secrets of masonry ... it may be that the Lemba provided the technical skill The discrete groups of Lemba have common ideas which separated them from people among whom they live ... their physical features (preserved by marriage) are distinctly Semitic: above all they are exceptionally good craftsmen in iron and bronze as well as in pottery. The building of Zimbabwe presented many technical problems which they are more likely to have been able to solve than their Venda, Karanga, Rozwi, Duma or other Shona neighbours.



Photo 8 *A conical tower at Great Zimbabwe Ruins*

Nevertheless, writing in 1894, the German missionary the Reverend Schlömann, who studied the Malepa (Lemba) of Northern Transvaal, maintained that the Lemba had lived in the area between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers during the eighteenth

century and that those in the Transvaal had previously migrated from the region in Zimbabwe. Schlömann was probably one of the first missionaries who had the opportunity to live among the Malepa and had a chance to observe and record their special customs. Schlömann highlights the fact that they held prayer meetings more frequently than other natives, they used a special language of which they did not know the meaning themselves and that they concluded their prayers, addressed to the ancestors, by the Hebrew word 'amena.' He also mentions that the number 7 was sacred to them, that they earlier had a fasting ceremony and that they buried their people differently from the other tribes.

In 1908 (:278) Junod was of the opinion that the Lemba reached the Selati district (near Leydsdorp) before the Ba-Thonga - that is at the end of the eighteenth century. In his view there was no doubt that the Lemba had been subjected to *Semitic influences* and that they were in contact with Muslims. One can deduce that he does not necessarily equate the Semitic influence and the contact with the Moslems in this instance. He noted that it is with remarkable obstinacy that they preserved some striking habits and customs from these influences earlier in their history. Junod mentioned, among others, the following characteristics of the Lemba which he observed: He stressed that the Lemba bled animals and only ate meat that was *kosher* killed by a Mulemba, they did not eat pork and practised *ngoma* (circumcision). He observed that they kept these customs without knowing why and that it had only become for them a national habit to *preserve their identity as a tribe*. Another custom was that they celebrated every new moon which they could observe before the non-Lemba (heathen, Vhazendji). Junod (1908:238) adds that the shaving of the head is 'for the Suto and the Thonga' a principal sign of mourning and that this custom accentuates some of the many differences between the Lemba and the other tribes. For the Lemba it is clearly a symbol of cleanliness and of festivity and (according to them) because they are a wise people. Another sacred principle for the Lemba is not to intermarry with other tribes. Junod also describes the *crafts and industries* of the Lemba, the skill of the women in making *earthenware* and the remarkable *metallurgical technique* of the men. He also mentions that most of the Lemba's merchandise often consisted of *medicine*.

Junod (1908:286) concluded that the advent of the European civilisation was rather disastrous for the Balemba, because European wares and wire were supplanting theirs and Christianity caused them to lose their special characteristics. He stressed that on the one hand, the Balemba did not seem to have kept the slightest trace of their faith in Allah, but on the other, that their *Semitic* habits showed that 'Mahommedanism' has a wonderful grasp on the native mind.

In the same year Wessmann (1908:129-132) observed that

[o]ne cannot avoid the often striking similarities between the African and the Jewish types. Again and again we find laws and customs amongst the African which force

the impression that there has been at some former time some kind of connection between the Blacks and the ancient Hebrews. In the Balemba tribe, one may find especially distinct traces of such a contact or connection. Reminders of this tribe are found amongst the Bawenda as well as in Rhodesia, and (as I have been told) particularly in the Congo

[H]ere they keep strictly separated from the Bawenda, and will hardly allow any marriage of one of their family to a Bawenda They also have the circumcision, and claim a certain authority before the others; and although they are subjects to the Bawenda, they will rarely or never do socage for them. They eat no pork, and avoid all meat of animals which have cloven hoofs, and animals which do not chew the cud They do not touch the meat of fallen animals kill the animals according to the Jewish rite, as if to render it 'kosher'. Formerly they were, a great commercial people, and there still exists among them, as well as the Bawenda, that ancient Israelite law, the 'Levirate marriage'.

There are also proverbs and peculiarities in actions which strongly savour of Israelite and Biblical soil. Thus stories and tales from the Old Testament are without difficulty translatable into the language of these tribes. The conditions also throw some light upon the meaning of different expressions and names in the Bible. For instance, the statement in the Bible relating to the different names of the father-in-law of Moses, or the expression 'brothers of Jesus' which gives rise to so many objections on the part of the uninitiated. For all cousins, male or female, from the mother's family are called brothers and sisters, as well as the children of the many wives of one man. The Hebrew also performs his important work in the morning, and as in Israel all law business is transacted sitting. Further, the tales of the blacks are always very voluble and full of parables and word-pictures. At the gate, as it was in Israel, public opinion is formed.... As only recently, after lengthy researches, the original relationship of the Semitic and Indo-Germanic languages has been proved, in the same way science will at some future time report on the relationship of these languages to the Semitic. Only to mention one feature: as in the Hebrew, one finds in these languages the same original forms of deflection and a wealth of deflected original forms; cf Hendrickx 1991).

The ethnologist, Bullock ([1927]1950:22), is also of the opinion that the Lemba were the descendants of a Semitic race, probably Arab, who had come inland from Kilwa or Zanzibar, trading or raiding. He is convinced that the custom of the Lemba to inter their deceased in a cavity in the wall of the grave pit (in which the corpse was laid to rest fully stretched), is of Muslim influence. However, this specific custom was, to a certain extent, also found among early Israel. A few years later Jaques (1931) added that the Lemba of Northern Transvaal buried their dead fully stretched out facing their direction of origin, namely north of the Limpopo of Southern Rhodesia.

In 1931 (:245-251) Junod again noted that the Lemba were anxious to preserve their tribal and ritual purity and stressed that they were 'sufficient traders'. A man of importance is shown great respect when he is addressed as *mušavi* (buyer; cf Tonga - *šava* 'buy'; a connection has also been suggested with Saba, Sheba; Van Warmelo 1935:122), *nyakuwana* ('the man who finds the things which are bought') or *mulungu*, probably 'white man' or 'the man from the North'.

Jaques (1931:248) contributes family traditions which bear witness to the commercial activities of the old Lemba. According to these traditions of the commercial traveller, he found it more profitable to devote his whole time to trade rather than to agriculture.

An outstanding feature of the Lemba which was recorded in 1894 by Schlömann and others is that 'they are the only African tribal group in this country which practises circumcision. Other groups who now practise it have almost invariably been influenced by the Lemba.' And Stayt (1931:234) also remarked: 'Every MuLemba boy must be circumcised at puberty.... I tentatively suggest that the BaLemba introduced circumcision to all the tribes in the Transvaal.' This might be true in the (former) Transvaal but earlier missionaries, travellers and others (mainly in the Cape; 16th and 17th centuries) observed that groups such as the Xhosa, Khoikhoi and Zulus similarly had a circumcision ceremony.

Many scholars have little doubt that the Venda were introduced to circumcision by the Lemba. But Jaques (1931:247) commented: 'They [the Lemba] play a prominent part as surgeons and medicine men in the circumcision ceremonies practised by the Venda, Tonga and Suto of the northern Transvaal.... [my insertion].' And Junod observed that his informant was convinced

that the Balemba have brought it into the country, and that the Suto and even the Tonga have borrowed the custom from them. It is true, at any rate, for the great BaVenda tribe. When Ramapulana, the grandfather of the present Venda tribe, was living, he strongly objected to the ngoma (circumcision lodge) being introduced amongst his people. But his son Makhado got into the circumcision lodge, and was initiated. His father said: 'He has become a Mulemba, kill him.' But the people had pity on him, and when he became chief the nation adopted the new rite (1908:44).

Thomas Huffman,²⁹ Professor of African Archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand, explains a good deal about the organisation of structures at Great Zimbabwe in terms of circumcision and initiation schools. His argument is that since such schools now exist among the Venda – a tribe more likely than any other in his view to have had something to do with the Great Zimbabwe culture – such schools must have existed at Great Zimbabwe. Using the same argument, Parfitt suggests that one could conclude that since the Lemba were a circumcising caste among the Venda, they may well have played a similar role in Great Zimbabwe. Boeyens (1997) indicates, however, that Huffman uses the *domba* (initiation school) from amongst the Venda as

a model to explain the interpretation and the function of certain structures at the Great Zimbabwean complex, and *not the murundu* (school of circumcision).

Van Warmelo (1935:122; 1937; 1977) describes the Lemba as, ethnologically speaking, one of the most important tribes of South Africa and indexed them as one of the five main Bantu tribes of South Africa. He is convinced that they are, beyond all doubt, Semites who have gradually drifted thus far to the South.

In 1936 Mphelo (a Lemba) commented that although little had come to light on their origin, they remained wanderers who at least before 1835 had migrated into the Transvaal.

In turn, Leo Frobenius (1938:162) describes the more 'recent' history of the Lemba as their being descendants of nomads, who spread from the 'Pungwe River in Mozambique, Vhendaland in Northern Transvaal and from the north of the Limpopo River.' He informs us that two (Lemba) groups lived among the Venda in Northern Transvaal (present-day Limpopo Province), two groups were found between the Nuanetsi and Ingezi (Southern Rhodesia), and one group lived in a nook between the Sabi and Rusape Rivers in Southern Rhodesia. He also contends that the Lemba used to pay tribute to the Karanga kings (Mambos), but they always reserved the right to move from one area to another. He stresses the fact that the Lemba designated all uncircumcised people, including their women, as *Vhasenzi*. Frobenius emphasises the restlessness of the Lemba, their constant *longing to travel* and the importance to them of preserving the purity of their tribe and of their culture with profound tenacity, even with fanaticism.

In 1942 Thompson came to a somewhat different conclusion, that the Lemba are somewhat like the Falasha, the 'Black Jews' in Ethiopia, and could perhaps have originated from an Abyssinian tribe, the Waklimi in the Sofala, and stressed that the Lemba could have both an Islamic element as well as a Jewish component. Von Sicard (1952) adds to this notion by submitting that the Lemba descend from the Zambezi Sena (who had been influenced by Islam; 19th century) and a much smaller group of Abyssinian Black Jews or Falasha.

Chigiga's study in 1972 concludes that the Lemba had been employed by Arabs to look for gold and that Sena (on the Zambezi) had been a place where they stayed before their wanderings as traders. He also provides information on the seven laws to be recited during their circumcision ceremonies in the Gutu District (Zimbabwe). While most of the laws are couched in an unfamiliar language, he states that the fifth law is pure Arabic: *Bismillah Allahu Akbar* (in the name of God, God is most great), uttered by Muslims whenever they pray. In contradiction to the conclusion reached by Chigiga, I found during my field research that many other Lemba in the Gutu District and elsewhere indicated that they do not want to be associated with Muslims in any way whatsoever. The Muslim influence could only be due to the fact that the Gutu District is the main Muslim centre where, in comparison with the rest of the Lemba in Zimbabwe and South Africa, a small group of Lemba were converted to this religious group.

Beach (1980:307) describes the ancestors of the Lemba as Shona-speaking, Sena-speaking or Swahili-speaking Muslims who crisscrossed the Mutapa empire as traders during the 16th and 17th centuries and who initially crossed the Limpopo into 'Northern Transvaal' (present-day Limpopo Province) but later returned to settle in Mberengwa again.

In 1983 and in 1989 (:108,109) Mandivenga, mistakenly to my mind, judged that most of the Lemba in Zimbabwe are Muslim and refers to the conversion of a small group of Lemba to the Muslim faith, as the re-Islamisation of the Varembe. He concludes that the Semitic influences among the Lemba are Islamic and not Jewish.

Recently, Mathivha (1992) records that the Sadhiki lineage which succeeded the Hadzhi dynasty in Mberengwa first moved southwards to the Dumbwi (Dumbghe) Mountain (100-50 BCE)³⁰ and then went into the Limpopo valley (in the Northern Transvaal) in order to be nearer to the copper ore there. This group built another big village where they smelted iron, gold, copper and silver and called it 'Mapungubwe' (i.e. 'the stones flowed like a liquid'). From Mapungubwe, he said, they migrated in an easterly direction until they joined another group of Basena from Mashonaland and settled at Dzata (50 CE;³¹ cf *Photo 9*). Mathivha points out that here again they built with stones as they did in Dumbghe and Great Zimbabwe. De Vaal is convinced that the Lemba were also involved in building the walls at Machemma (north of the Soutpansberg Mountain; cf *Photo 10*).

In view of recent archaeological evidence from Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe it seems more likely that a group from Mapungubwe moved northwards to assist in the building of Great Zimbabwe. Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are some of the best dated archaeological areas in Southern Africa. The occupation of Mapungubwe dates from about the 10th to the 12th century CE. These accounts also indicate that the explanation of the name Mapungubwe is, rather, the 'place of the jackal'. There is also no evidence that the Mapungubwe kingdom came into being at the beginning of the Christian era, as Mathivha indicates - and even less evidence that the Lemba can be linked to this. According to oral traditions of the Venda, a near contemporary witness, as well as radiocarbon datings, the occupation of Dzata by the Singo had already commenced in the second half of the seventeenth century CE. Boeyens (1997) confirms that there is no available evidence that Dzata was already occupied by the Venda and Lemba in 50 CE.³²

Parfitt (1992:249-250), tracing these matters way back in history, is quite convinced of the similarities between the practices of the 'Moors' and the Lemba and in particular their enthusiasm for lunar festivals and circumcision. According to him, various oral traditions agree that the Lemba and Venda came to the South together and that the Lemba actually guided the Venda and told them where to go. The Lemba knew the routes south, probably as traders or because of their magical powers. Lestrade

([1927]1960:28) assures us, however, that the Lemba came from groups allied to the Karanga groups and that they have settled in Venda territory 'in comparatively recent times'.



Photo 9 *Dzata Ruins, Soutpansberg Mountains*



Photo 10 *Machemma Ruins, north of Waterpoort (Soutpansberg) showing chevron, herring-bone and chequerboard patterns*

On account of the fact that the Lemba were traders or wanderers their history differs from clan to clan. A reconstruction depends solely on oral traditions and therefore only a few 'genealogies' (without references to any dating) and histories could be traced. Connoway (1976; 1978) refers to the 'genealogies' of at least nine groups of Lemba: the Nyakavhi clan, the Hadzhi clan, the Bakali clan, the Sadiki clan, the Buba clan, the Hamisi clan, the Tovhakhali clan, the Mhani clan and lastly the Bhenga, Hasane, Ngavhi, Maange and Salifo clans. Other divisions of Lemba clans are also possible and do in fact exist.

It is clear from this division that the Lemba are comprised of different clans and that every clan has its own historical and genealogical background. The traditions of each clan played a role in their identity formation but they were all known as the Lemba. In time they had to adjust to each other, differences apparently blurred and they had to move across boundaries to remain or become 'one'.

From the 'genealogy' and history of the Nyakavhi clans³³ recorded by Connoway, the inference could be drawn that *Ya swoswe* (in the endnote) is most probably a reference to a place near Sena on the Zambezi. In the meantime, Connoway's informant Phophi died, but Connoway still recorded clear traditions of their Israelite origins and specific customs inherited from their ancestors.

On the Hadzhi clan Connoway reports:

Tradition has it that the founder of the clans was known as Nkalahonye. Nkalahonye's son, Tshinyamaseto, led by Dimbanyika (father of the legendary Thoho-ya-Ndou) emigrated with the Venda to the Singo tribe from Rhodesia [from the mountain Mbelengwa] and went to live in the Nzelele Valley, where they built Dzata.... Since this area was so beautiful, [Tshinyamaseto] returned to Mbelengwa, and convinced other Lemba of the Tovhakhale, Sadike and the Mhani clans to move south. Tshinyamaseto died in the Nzelele Valley, and was succeeded by his son, Gwizi-gwa-Vhembe... he [was] succeeded by his son Livhoya. During the disputes which led to the destruction of Dzata, it was Livhoya who went to live at Swongozwi, a place near Louis Trichardt ... [and] he became good friends with Ramabulana, a Venda captain. In acknowledgement of this friendship he was given an area to control at Mara (Buffalo Valley). [H]e [was].... succeeded by his son Ndiliwahonye. After his death Makhado followed. He lived during the reign and exile of Chief Mphephu. Makhado was succeeded by Maipane Frans Ndouvhada.

The other Hadzhi lines' history is a typical example of a clan with a heterogenous past (Connoway 1978:35,36 [my translation]).

Many of the Hadzhi's ancestors were buried at Buffalo Valley (Mara, near Elim in the Northern Province), and the Shimbani Mountain is one of their holy mountains where various religious ceremonies and rituals still take place. In fact it is on account of the

history of this area and the sentiments attached to it, that the Lemba lay claim to this area and are, today, still negotiating at government level for an area of their own.

According to Connoway the Bakhali clan came from Masenzhele to Venda, but not as one group: one of the Bakhali lines moved southwards and later another group moved with the Venda to Nzelele Valley and later still, on account of the wars, they moved to Dzimauli. Here the two groups divided again: the one moved to Mahuvha and the other to Thengwe, Vhondwe and Tangaheni. Connoway, however, does not indicate where Masenzhele is.

On the Sadiki clan he collected the information that

[t]he name, Sadike, did not like the other clan names disappear in the course of time. Today there are numerous lines of the clan with the name of Sadike. Although this is the case, they cannot trace their genealogical connections to one another (Connoway 1978:37,38 [my translation]).

All the Sadikis record today that they came from Rhodesia to Venda (Joseph Sadiki 1996).

According to the Lemba the Buba is the oldest and originally the priestly clan of the Lemba, and the tradition holds that they were actually led from Judaea to Yemen by a man named Buba. Experts among the Falasha in Ethiopia aver, according to Mathivha (1992; 1997), that 'Buba' is an aberration of the name 'Juda'. DNA results, specifically involving the Buba clan, only became known in 1998 and 1999. The Lemba already had these traditions about the Buba as the priestly clan long before the genetic tests had been done, which tests show their links with the Jewish priests elsewhere.

More recently, the Buba clan lived at Nyaodha in the Mbelengwa district (Rhodesia). Connoway (1978:38) records that

a [s]ection of the clans moved from there to Madzivhanombe. The latter is a mountain in Giyani. From there they migrated to Luvhimbi (near Makonde). The leader there was Tshirumbule. [His] successor [was] Itani and [his] successor was Swiswi, they all had chieftain status (subservient to a Venda chief). After Swiswi's death a Venda took over the chieftainship. Swiswi's successor (not a chief) was Maanzhi, the father of Maphwanya, the father of Nthangeni and Ambani. Maphwanya and his sons lived at Miluwani near Sibasa....

Another section of the Bhubha clan, the Matshilis, trekked from Nyaodha to Dzinghae in Venda. On account of the wars amongst the Venda of Mphaphuli, they moved to chief Mphigalale (under the leadership of chief Tshivhase) in Vhufula, and lived there. After the wars they went to Ngwenani and eventually again to Dzinghae. From there some moved to Mbahe [my translation].

Presently, the greatest concentration of the Buba clan can be found in India Village, in Sekhukhuneland and Shiyandima (Limpopo Province).

Connaway (1978:39) further records that the Hamisi clan came from an area next to Mountain Makotole, as well as from a place named Bhela (in Rhodesia). From there they moved to Makonde. From Makonde

[t]hey moved from there past Malungudi to Makonde. From Makonde the Mailanombes trekked away to Tshiombo. The Rasilingwani line migrated to Muvhuya and the Ngwana line to Thenzhani. The Rasilingwani line moved from Muvhuya to Ngwenani. With the outbreak of the war between Mphephu and the white people, they fled to Lunungwi, where they lived for two years. After the wars they moved back to Ngwenani. From there they trekked to Vuvha. Because the white people began to buy farms in that area, they went to live at Tshilivho.

The history of the Moeti line could also be partly traced. According to Hendrik Moeti they moved from Vhukalanga to the Transvaal, on account of trade considerations. Later they moved from an unknown place in Venda on account of the wars amongst the Venda, to an area near Elim [my translation].

Today, Samuel Moeti, a Member of Parliament in the Limpopo Province (**cf Photo 11**), has a farm in Elim. This is very close to the farm Sweet Waters where the Lemba annually have their LCA Conferences. A farmer, Henning, gave them permission to use his farm for their meetings where they erected a permanent structure for themselves, to use as an annual gathering place. This is the same place where the LCA eventually wants to erect a kind of synagogue.

As far as the Tovhakhali clan is concerned, Connaway (1978:40) mentions the following tradition:

The Tovhakhale clan trekked from Busena and Tshamulungwana in Rhodesia (near Mbelengwa) to Tshingoma and thereafter to Messina in the Transvaal. They were the first people who excavated the mines at Messina. Some of them trekked from Messina to the Mountain Mashau in the south of Venda, since the land there was more suited to agriculture.



Photo 11 *Mr Samuel Moeti, Member of RSA Parliament and new President of the LCA*

As was the case of the Sadikis, there are still lines who presently carry the original clan name [my translation].

Busena is most probably the same as Basena. Much has been written on the so-called 'copperminers' of Musina.

A group of the Mhani clan

reached Luonde in Venda Land by the time the Venda had already settled there. They originated from Muthavhanane, a place near Mbelengwa. According to an informant the Lemba clans lived amongst one another when they still lived in Rhodesia. For instance the Mhani clan lived amongst the Tovhakhales. The only line of whom a genealogy can still be traced, was the Phathela line (Connaway 1978:40 [my translation]).

One of the leading Lemba at the LCA Conferences is Chaplain Mhani, who usually opens the occasion with Scripture reading and prayer (cf *Photo 12*). The selection of Scripture is usually taken from the Old Testament.



Photo 12 *Chaplain Mhani, during Scripture reading at the LCA Conference*

Finally, regarding the Bhenga, Hasane, Ngavhi, Maange and Salifo clans:

About these clans, no substantial information could be gleaned, since their current membership are relatively small, and they live over a wide area. Thus it is difficult to get into touch with them. Besides this, the members of these clans are young, and they could hardly provide any useful information in this regard (Connoway 1978:40 [my translation]).

Today the greatest concentration of Lemba are still to be found in the southern parts of Zimbabwe amongst the Shona and in the Limpopo Province (RSA) amongst the Venda, in Mpumalanga (RSA) in Sekhukhuneland amongst the Sotho, and in the Mara and Elim districts (also amongst the Sotho). They speak the language of the peoples surrounding them and mountains usually played a central role in the areas where they lived or to which they moved and settled.

Various interviews were conducted during my field research in the Soutpansberg (Limpopo Province) which included people who grew up with the Lemba in that area, or who were in daily contact with them. Among these were the Lemba and Venda art collectors, Victor Madden, Karen Marais (on the farm Studholme) and Dr Smalle (on the farm Hilltop), as well as Piet Wessels (farmer) and Piet van den Berg (a school principal in the former Venda). They especially testify about the uniqueness of the Lemba and their exclusive customs.

According to Norbert Hahn, a botanist, a number of plants reached the Soutpansberg Mountains by means of the Lemba's trade and other connections with the Arabs. There is a whole story to be told about the Arabian and other plants which can be found in these mountains. According to him most of these plants were probably imported for use in their cultic practices. Once again, it is striking how even this aspect has certain points of congruence with the oral tradition of the Lemba and other groups.

To conclude: Estimates of the size of the Lemba people vary greatly. Schapera ([1937]1946:65) wrote: 'Some hundreds of adult males in the Union [and] in Southern Rhodesia... 1500 males...' Blacking (1967:41) estimated: 'There are probably no more than about 2 000 Lemba living scattered or in little pockets among the Venda ... few others may be found in different parts of the Transvaal....' and the Rand Daily Mail of 15 September 1982 spoke rather extravagantly of 'South Africa's 250,000 "black Jews" the Lemba' Today, in the vicinity of Sekhukhuneland (Mpumalanga) alone, there are about 10 000 - 20 000 Lemba, in the former Venda another 30 000 and in the southern parts of Zimbabwe there are at least another 20 000 Lemba. These numbers exclude the Lemba in the rest of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. I therefore estimate the total of the Lemba at about 60 000, but it could even be higher. Mathivha (1999b), however, considers it to be about 250 000.

Theories of origin

To a certain extent all early traditions of the Lemba tell the same story. The consensus of opinion among all the researchers who have studied this people seriously, has been that there are Semitic elements in their ancestry. But one of the main differences of opinion on the Lemba is about whether they are Islamic or pre-Islamic in origin. Very few scholars even consider the possibility of a pure Bantu origin. Connoway discerns three different schools of thought concerning the specific nature of the Semitic culture involved in the origin of the Lemba: (i) a pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic origin, (ii) an Islamic-Arabic origin and (iii) a Falasha-Abyssinian origin.

A pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic origin

Gayre of Gayre (1972:199) holds that available evidence is consistent with a pre-Islamic and Judaised Arab origin. He believes that the Lemba's history can specifically be traced back to the pre-Islamic Saba (or Sheba) in Yemen, which was converted to Judaism. Gayre of Gayre (1972:134) contends that the evidence of the Lemba tradition leaves no room for doubt that the only time when Judaised Arabs could have settled in the Himyarite colonies in East Africa and former Rhodesia to give birth to this cross-bred people, was around the *sixth century CE*. This happened before the Arabs became Christians and afterwards Muslims. He further argues that the Lemba have very clear traces of Jewish religion, for example circumcision and their *kosher* laws, as well as very strong *Armenoid racial traits* (cf **Photo 13**). These traits can still be seen amongst some of the Lemba: they are taller than other people, have prominent noses and are fair skinned.



Photo 13 *Lemba (Van Warmelo, 1940)*

To strengthen his argument, Gayre of Gayre (1967:6,7) suggests that the rejection of pork, or killing in the *kosher* manner by bleeding, would be a remarkable coincidence on its own, but when the prohibition from eating hares, rabbits, scaleless fish and carrion is added to the list,

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

At the beginning of this century Jaques³⁴ could find no trace of 'Mohammedanism' in the Lemba's religious ceremonies as suggested by Junod. He did find, however, that they refer to Moses in their prayers and that their prayers were ended by the word 'Amin'³⁵. He also connects one of the clan or family names of the Lemba, the Sadiki, with the Hebrew (the righteous). Some of the other names he assumes could be Arabic or Bantu. He concludes that the Lemba show strong traces of 'considerable Semitic influence'.

The genetic research being done by Spurdle and Jenkins also, to a certain extent, supports this theory by Gayre of Gayre. They summarise the characteristics and history of the Lemba as follows (1996:1131): 'Jewish settlements were common in Yemen up to the 6th century CE, although it is likely that some of these Jewish groups were Arab proselytes.' They are further convinced that certain features of Lemba culture would seem to suggest that Jewish ancestry is more likely than Arabic - a fact reflected in the present-day genetic profile of Yemenite Jews. They specifically refer to the practice of separating milk and meat, which is a dietary law observed in Judaism and not in Islam. Nabarro (cited in Spurdle & Jenkins 1996:1131; **cf Photo 14**) further maintains that the method of male circumcision used by the Lemba 'differs markedly from that of Muslims'.



Photo 14 Dr M Nabarro revealing the genetic results (done by Prof Jenkins and others), at the LCA Conference in 1995

Hendrickx (1991:175-181) also considers this theory a possibility (but not without reservations). He considers the theory pointing to a pre-Islamic-Arab-Judaic origin as very

interesting. He is convinced that 'one cannot assume that seemingly contradictory theories exclude each other ... the more sophisticated studies also came several times to a point where the Lemba's origin, when dissected in its ethnic religious, linguistic and cultural elements, seemed to find its roots, among others in Jewish *and* Arab phenomena at a very early stage'. In this regard he refers to the Annals of Oman, de Barros's Asia, Kitab al Zanuj, Chronicles of Lamu, Pate and Kilwa, which all in conjunction with each other refer to the early Arab (Yemen) immigration to Africa (Mathews 1963:102-105).

Relating oral traditions and historical facts to genetic data

Genetic tests by Spurdle and Jenkins from the South African Institute for Medical Research at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), and Bradman (and Parfitt) from the Centre for Genetic Anthropology at University College, London, have shown interesting connections between the Lemba people and those from whom they claim to have originated. This is in contradistinction, for example, to similar tests taken from the Falasha and other African peoples surrounding them.

According to currently available genetic evidence the proposed relationship between the Ethiopian Jews, the Lemba and the Jews in Israel, is highly questionable. Genetic studies indicate that the Ethiopian 'Jews' are similar to other Ethiopian populations. They exhibit a genetic profile that represents an admixture of African and Caucasoid (probably Mediterranean) groups.

Spurdle and Jenkins summarise the history of the Lemba as follows (1996:1131,1132):

Sa'na was a powerful city controlling trade routes of the Sabaean empire (Lewcock 1986), and Jews of Sa'na worked mostly as artisans and craftsmen, specializing in pottery and metalwork (Goitein 1971). Thus it is entirely possible that the ancestors of the Lemba were Jewish craftsmen and traders from Sa'na in Yemen. However, the migration of Semitic women with the Lemba is doubtful, since mtDNA variation in the Lemba [women] provides no evidence of Semitic admixture (Soodyall 1993).

The possibility that ancestors of the Lemba were Jewish craftsmen and traders from Yemen (600 CE and later), again reflects an oral tradition. The genetic results are also consistent with the oral tradition that only males came by boat to Africa and later had to take local wives. Their research suggests both a Bantu and a Semitic contribution to the Lemba gene pool.

In order to provide a more detailed picture of the Lemba paternal genetic heritage, scholars such as Thomas (et al 1998:33) 'analysed 399 Y chromosomes for six microsatellites and six biallelic markers in six populations (Lemba, Bantu, Yemeni-Hadramaut, Yemeni-Sena, Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazic Jews).' This specific genetic side of the investigation started when Dr Karl Skorecki, a kidney expert at the Technion

- Israel Institute of Technology, was sitting in an Orthodox synagogue in Toronto (*Jerusalem Report*, May 1999). Skorecki, who is a *cohen* (priest) himself, wondered if a fellow priest who was called to attend the first Torah reading, traditionally reserved for *cohanim* (priests), might be distantly related to him, as the tradition of priestly descent from Aaron implied. He realised that it might be possible to check: Under religious law, priestly status is obtained through patrilineal inheritance. He contacted Dr Michael Hammer of the University of Arizona, an expert who studies the genetics of human populations through males, or the Y-chromosome. He agreed to cooperate and at a later stage Skorecki teamed up with Neil Bradman, chairman of the Centre for Genetic Anthropology at University College, London. Thus the collection of DNA from Jewish males began - priests and members of the two ancient classes, Levites and Israelites. Parfitt, director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, who has done research among the Lemba, suggested that the Lemba should be included in this investigation.

In 1996 Bradman and Parfitt collected 120 male DNA samples in the Hadramaut from Terim and Sena for this purpose (cf *Map I*). The results show a significant similarity between markers of many of the Hadramaut Y-chromosomes and those of the Lemba. Even genetic markers common in Jewish groups, including the Jewish priesthood (in Israel and world-wide) show up both in the Hadrami DNA and in the Lemba. According to Parfitt these results could indicate that in the remote past Jews or descendants of Jews inhabited the Hadramaut and emigrated to the shores of Africa (cf *Map I*), but he does not indicate a specific date; not even BCE or CE. This reflects a change in Parfitt's earlier theory that the Lemba most probably underwent a religious shift.

During my field study (1997/1998) I was asked by Parfitt and Bradman from the Centre for Genetic Anthropology at University College, London, to participate in the gathering of DNA samples (using saliva samples) from the Lemba in the southern parts of Zimbabwe and in South Africa. The results were published in 2000 (Thomas et al). From DNA samples, taken specifically from the Buba clan (the priestly clan), in Sekhukhuneland and elsewhere, a very close relation has emerged between them (the Buba) and those of the priesthood in Israel (cf *Photo 15*).

It should be clarified that the priesthood are not the same as rabbis. The latter are appointed functionaries while members of the priestly class inherit their position through the male line. The *leviim* or Levites are non-*cohen* members of the paternally defined priestly tribe of Levi.

In biblical tradition, Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first priest (cf Nm 25). God awarded the priesthood to him and his sons; in other words, the priesthood is passed on through the Y-chromosome and there is no legitimate way in which a non-priest can become a priest. Scholars reasoned that if tradition had been faithfully maintained, with the priesthood being passed, by and large, from father to son throughout the genera-

tions, an island of Y-chromosomes of Jewish priests would have been created within, but separated from, a sea of non-priests. There is no way to identify the descendants of the priesthood except perhaps through their oral traditions and by the distinctive pattern on their Y-chromosomes.

The distinctive pattern predominantly found among members of the Jewish priesthood, the *cohanim*, is called the *Cohen Modal Haplotype* (CMH).³⁶ This pattern of paternal inheritance (common set of genetic markers on the Y-chromosome) has preserved the CMH as a potential watermark for Judaism. The frequency of the CMH differs consid-



Photo 15 Chief of the Buba clan, Sekhukhuneland

erably among the three groups mentioned above (*kohanim*: 0.509, *leviim*: 0.037 and Israelites: 0.118; Thomas et al 2000). Equivalent figures for the frequency of the modal haplotype in the other populations are Ashkenazic Israelites 0.150, Sephardic Israelites 0.100, Yemeni 0.020, Sena 0.407 and Lemba 0.118. Specifically, the samples taken from the Buba (the priestly clan of the Lemba), indeed showed a high frequency of this same pattern (CMH). In other words it was found that 45 percent of Ashkenazi priests and 56 percent of Sephardic priests have the *kohen genetic signature*, while in Jewish populations in general the frequency is 3 to 5 percent. Among the Lemba it is 8.8 percent, a similar frequency to the Israelites (Jewish males). Among the Buba, though, it is as high as 53.8 percent.

According to Thomas these results are supportive evidence that there was a 'Jewish' element in the history of the Lemba which could date from 3,000 years ago. Hammer (Turetsky, *Jerusalem Report*, May 1999), a world expert in evolutionary genetics at the University of Arizona (Tucson), says

it is incredibly exciting to find something that could be tracing paternally-inherited traits over 40 to 50 generations, three or four thousand years of history. This is the first time ever we have been able to make a correlation with the ethnographic record over this time scale. Some people keep records that go back three, maybe four generations. But 50 generations!

In 2000 Thomas (et al) add that

the genetic evidence revealed in this study is consistent with a Lemba history involving an origin in a Jewish population outside Africa, male mediated gene flow from other Semitic immigrants and admixture with Bantu neighbours. All three groups are likely to have been contributors to the Lemba gene pool and there is no need to postulate an either/or question of Arab versus Judaic contributions to that gene pool; both are likely to have occurred.

Furthermore, Thomas emphasises that the presence of the CMH in the Buba could, however, 'have an *exclusively* Judaic origin' [my italics]. This information is once again consistent with the oral traditions of the Lemba and specifically the Buba tribe. Although I recognise that these results of genetic testing are the subject of debate, at this stage these are the only results available.

It is evident that the Lemba were accepted by some authorities in Israel as Jewish even before the latest genetic results were made known. This is to some extent in contradiction to Parfitt and others who earlier discern a negative attitude by the Israeli Government towards groups in Africa who regard themselves as Jewish. How widely the Lemba are accepted as Jews, I am not too sure, but a letter from Rabbi David Marciano Ben Yishai (distributed by Mathivha, president of the Lemba Cultural Association [LCA] in April 1997) officially declared that the Lemba of Southern Africa were Jews and insisted that they should be treated as such by all the Jewish institutions worldwide. He said they should now begin the process of returning the Lemba Jews to the mainstream of world Jewry. He further decreed that they should help the Lemba Jews in every way to realise their identity as an authentic 'tribe of Jews'. This is of course biased evidence that could not yet be checked with the Rabbi and the authorities he represents.

In 1999 after the genetic results were made known in the *New York Times* (Wade, 9 May 1999) and the *Jerusalem Report* (10 May 1999; emailed by Turetsky) some Jewish rabbis and other interested Jews worldwide announced that they would in the very near

future send representatives to the different Lemba communities in Southern Africa (Levi, email communication, 1999). This eventually became a reality in January 2002 when Rabbi Leo Abrami visited the Lemba in the Limpopo Province (Elim). However, the article in the *Jerusalem Report* refers to a letter received by Bradman (Centre of Genetic Anthropology at University College, London) from an adviser to British Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, saying he rejects genetic testing in determining Jewish status. Presumably, Israel's Chief Rabbi would give the same answer. The 'Who's a Jew' issue, says Bradman, 'is a matter for the rabbis. Not for scientists'.

Criticism of the pre-Islamic-Judaic-Arabic theory

Connoway gives credit to Gayre of Gayre's criticism of Mullan's theory, but considers Gayre of Gayre's justification for a pre-Islamic past for the Lemba as unsubstantiated. He criticises the fact that Gayre of Gayre jumps to the conclusion that because the Lemba have additional food taboos on the eating of hares, rabbits and scaleless fish, the Lemba observe a Mosaic code and, therefore, do have pre-Islamic ancestors. Connoway maintains that in the same way, he could connect the Lemba's totem, the elephant, to the Muslim religion, which considers the elephant as a holy animal - not to be eaten.³⁷

Connoway also criticises Gayre of Gayre and De Vaal for considering the circumcision rite as typically Jewish. He maintains that circumcision is also practised by Muslims and also during puberty, like the Lemba and 'not 7 days after birth like the Jews.' Price in his study on Islam in Malawi, however, states that the Lemba do not circumcise their boys during puberty as the other Bantu groups, but as infants. Phophi and others also indicated that earlier they circumcised their boys on the 8th day, but now other groups have influenced them to do it later.

Hendrickx in turn gives credit to Gayre of Gayre's facts, as far as the rule of Dhú Nuwás and the consequent war with the Ethiopians are concerned: the existence of a type of Mosaic Code (cf Lv 9:3-10, 39) amongst the Lemba as well as some Ethiopian and/or Sabaeen influences in the former Rhodesia are arguments in favour of his (Gayre of Gayre's) theory. However, Hendrickx surmises that there is not enough evidence for the alleged flight of the 'Jewish' Yemenites to East Africa, and says that the question of Himyarite colonisation is still controversial. But in general Hendrickx would concur with this theory.

An Islamic-Arabic origin

Stayt is convinced that the Lemba are really the descendants of Arab traders who took wives from the races with whom they traded, that they were associated with Sena and had Arabic or Swahili derived names such as Seremane, Hadji and Salifo. He connects

the identification of the Emozaid (Islamic) with the Lemba. He quotes an Arab writer, Dimashqui, who wrote *circa* 1320, that 'the island of Quambalu (Madagascar) had a negro Mohammedan population of the Zaidite and Shafite sects.' McCall Theal (cited in Stayt 1931:231) comments that at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese 'there were feuds between nearly all of the Mohammedan settlements on the coast ... it was at Sofala. Acote was at the head of a party at variance with Mengo Musafi ... very likely Acote was made Sheik of the Emozaid, as he is stated to have been of that sect, and Suleiman - Sheik of the other Mohammedans.'

Mullan (1969:19) draws attention to the way 'all of them [Mposi's people and Ba-Mwenye] ... greet one another as "Musoni" which appears to be a corruption for "Sunni" – the name used from the beginning of their faith, by all who regarded themselves as orthodox Mohammedans.' Mullan's arguments are mainly based on customs, oral traditions, linguistic interpretations and historical chronicles.³⁸

Bullock ([1927]1950:45) writes of the Lemba that they still swear by Sayid (Zaid) but they don't know who he was. With names such as Zaid (or Sayid),³⁹ Sadiki (from the Arab surname, Sadiq) and Seremane (from the Arab surname, Suleiman), Stayt (1931:236,237) therefore accepts the Lemba's ancestors as having been Arabic-Mohammedan refugees under the leadership of Suleiman and Zaid and the later Emozaid-Arabs.

Also agreeing on the Islamic-Arabic origin of the Lemba, Chigaga (1972:19) submits that the Lemba ancestors had been employed by Arabs to look for ivory and gold and that Sena had been the place where they stayed before their wanderings started. He also emphasises that they were traders. In the Gutu area, where a number of Lemba were recently converted to Islam, he 'discovered' numerous laws, words and utterances that are, according to him, clearly Arabic and derived from the Islamic faith.

In 1992 (:254) Parfitt had already kept a back door open by stating that the Lemba are of composite origin; in the remote past Arabs, Indians and perhaps others took Zanj wives and gradually came to form a separate people. However, he concludes that in religious terms, most of the Semitic characteristics which existed in the tribe's past may be explained via Islam. But he also opines that 'we should accept that in some sense all religions are syncretistic and therefore we know that Christianity borrowed heavily from Judaism [and] Islam from both Judaism and Christianity.' Parfitt (1992:254) therefore, concludes:

In the Lemba case what remained was an Islam without the Quran, without the Prophet Muhammed, without the name of Allah. What remained was a series of religious practices which, despite many curious features, substantially resembled the religious culture of the ancient people of Israel⁴⁰ [my endnote].

In fact, it is this possible resemblance and the preservation of an ancient type of religion (a Hebrew heritage?) that I shall investigate in Chapters Four to Nine of this book.

Criticism of the Islamic-Arabic theory

Gayre of Gayre (1972:162) explains that Mullan (and others) could be correct, in general, when they argue that the ancestors of the Lemba were Arabs who, when entering the country (the former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe), found Arabs from Yemen (Saba) in Rhodesia. However, Gayre of Gayre shows how Mullan's theory falls apart when he connects building Zimbabwe with these Arabs; the first phase of Zimbabwe was built long before the Islamic period. He similarly criticises the significance Mullan places on the name Zaid, and argues that the ancestor of the Lemba could have been any Zaid, not necessarily the founder of the sect. And the names Sadiki and Seremane only stress the Arabic (Yemenite) origin of the Lemba, nothing else. Gayre of Gayre is further convinced that Mullan's explanation of the word 'Musoni' is a mere misinterpretation. Even if *musoni* were a Semitic related word, it does not mean that it comes from *sunni*, as used by the Muslim-Arabs.

Connoway (1978:33) can accept neither the theory of Gayre of Gayre (1967; 1972) nor that of Mullan (1969) and he adds that the only reason why he would rather accept the theory of Mullan than that of Gayre of Gayre, is that Mullan went deeper into Lemba history than did Gayre of Gayre, who only speculates about their origin. My argument, on the contrary, is that Mullan does *not* search sufficiently far back into the Lemba's past for possible clues, nor does he give sufficient attention to the oral traditions of the Lemba and groups in the Yemen and obviously could not take other disciplines such as genetics into account.

Parfitt's (1992) theory of an original Muslim Lemba people, is according to Hendrickx (1994:195) 'tempting, but ... far from proven':

[He] does not explain why the Lemba (or most of them) selected a Jewish identity (as stated in Parfitt's Prologue in his book). Nor does he explain most of the Transvaal Lemba's aggressive negation of a possible Muslim or Arab origin. And why is there - seemingly - on this account some discrepancy between the attitude and beliefs of the Transvaal Lemba and the Zimbabwe Mwenye (as the Lemba call themselves in the latter region)? Parfitt does not examine the theories sufficiently which connect the Lemba origin with the Moslem immigrations to the east coast of Africa, nor does he make room for a more sophisticated ethnogenesis of the Lemba people

One must especially take into account the vehement negation of a possible Muslim or Arab origin by most of the Lemba themselves. This negation occurs at many different places despite the remoteness of location or language.

A *Falasha-Abyssinian origin*

Thompson (1942:85) seemingly introduced the idea that in some of their rites and observances, the Lemba were somewhat like the Falasha, the Black Jews of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). He held that Sofala, from which much gold emanated in the past, was inhabited by a tribe of Abyssinians. He refers to Dos Santos (1609), who confirms that the Monomotapa and his people resembled the Abyssinians. Thompson emphasises thus that both Islamic and Jewish elements are found in the culture of the Lemba.

Thompson (1942:85,86) further records that the ancestors of the Lemba came from Sena on the Zambezi River (where the Islamic influence occurred), and Sofala on the east coast of Africa. Although, according to him, they had an *admixture of Arab blood*, he stresses that it is unlikely that they were originally Arabs, since their style of architecture is not Arabic, but in their 'former industries' some rites and observances they have are somewhat akin to the Falashas of Abyssinia. He holds that Sofala, from which much gold was brought, was inhabited by a tribe of Abyssinians who had migrated thereto and whose king, the Waklimi, had his capital near the famous gold centre. Thompson therefore, posits a Jewish-Lemba link and suggests that the culture of the Lemba could have both Islamic and Jewish components.

Von Sicard (1962:68-80) contends that the Lemba descended from two originally distinct tribal groups: the numerically stronger Zambesi Sena, who had been influenced by Islam (with ethnic ties with the Arabs), and a much smaller group of Abyssinian Black Jews or Falashas.⁴¹ The latter brought to the southern interior Old Testament traditions and rituals, but he does not name the specific traditions and rituals he has in mind. Later Von Sicard adds a third group coming from the east and arriving at the Sabi River before the end of the 16th century, and puts forward his theory of the Lemba ethnogenesis evolving from these three above-mentioned groups and in effect stresses an Arab-Jewish origin.

In his book *Ngoma Lungundu* ('The drum of the ancestors')⁴² Von Sicard examines the parallels between the *ngoma lungundu* story and the Old Testament story (the Israelite Ark of the Covenant; cf Ex; 1 Sm 3,4) and those between the *ngoma lungundu* and the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast* in order to prove his theory. The 13th century *Kebra Nagast* ('Splendour of Kings') relates how Prince Menelik, son of King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sheba, visited Jerusalem and returned to the South with an escort of Israelite priests, who stole the sacred Ark out of the Temple of Jerusalem, left a replica in its place and took the real Ark to Axum (Ethiopia). In the same manner, the Lemba, in the *ngoma lungundu* story, carried with them the sacred drum downwards to Southern Africa. Of course, this is an unfounded tradition. The theory still appears to be controversial. Also, both traditions referred to in the previous paragraph could have elements of truth in them. What is interesting though, is that both the Lemba and the Ethiopians possessed a kind of an 'ark' tradition. The Ethiopians believe that it was a real ark, whereas

early observers (not specifically the Lemba themselves) believe that it was something that resembled an ark (meaning the *ngoma lungundu*).

In particular, Von Sicard (1952:170-175) indicates that the *ngoma lungundu* traditions could not have derived from the Islamic Lemba group seeing that the Ark of the Covenant did not play such a role in the Koran or in the Islam faith, that Abyssinia (Ethiopia) is literally called the 'Trommelzentrum' and lastly that the Ark of the Covenant played a dominant role in the religious life of the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) and in the *Kebra Nagast*, their holy book.

Von Sicard (1952:175) concludes that

[t]here is good reason to suppose that the Hamitoid people of Rhodesia brought with them the Jewish Lemba who were black-smiths and builders and it was through this that Old Testament traditions entered Rhodesia. Among these traditions the *ngoma lungundu* occupied a special place. The belief in God of the Lemba has been preserved along with that part of Mwari [Mwali] worship which emphasises God's sacredness and uniqueness

Mathivha similarly believes that after they had arrived in Africa, one group of the Lemba went westwards and settled in Ethiopia while the other group led by Hamisi migrated southwards along the coast until they first settled on mountains at a place they called Sena II, and after that at Sena III, in the valley. None of the early ethnographers that I could find report Lemba claims of Falasha ancestry. Here one must ask how and where did the Lemba arrive in Africa. They could have come from Saba across the Red Sea, in which case they would have landed in Ethiopia. In that case they probably went south and west to Zimbabwe.

Criticism of the Falasha-Abyssinian theory

Mandivenga is convinced that Thompson's Jewish-Lemba link is improbable, although not impossible. He feels that Thompson does not adduce any real evidence for this hypothesis and he is convinced that there is not a single Jewish custom or trait among the Lemba which cannot be explained equally well by means of Islamic influence. The opposite is of course also true. There is not a single so-called Islamic custom among the Lemba which cannot be explained equally well with reference to Jewish influence and then there are Semitic influences which are also not Islamic.

Connoway concludes (1978:33-41) that

Thompson and Von Sicard's theories cannot be rejected off-hand. The Lemba could possibly have originated by the joining of two racial groups. [V]iewpoints about the origins of the Lemba indicate that there is a considerable difference from the rest of

the Bantu of the South, namely that they are the descendents of Semitic traders from the East Coast of Africa...; [my translation].

Connoway compares the Lemba with other Judaizing movements elsewhere in the world, where Judaism had such a great influence on the religion of these movements. Ethnically, these groups could clearly be distinguished from other Jews in Europe and America, but the only strong Jewish element in their culture is their religion. In the case of the Lemba, not only their ethnicity, but also their religion, is totally different from Judaism, says Connoway.

Spurdle and Jenkins (1996:1131,1132) react as follows to Mathivha's proposed relationship between the Ethiopian Jews and the Lemba:

The proposed genetic relationship between the Ethiopian Jews and the Lemba, as suggested by Mathivha (1992) is highly questionable. Data from various classical, nuclear-DNA, and mtDNA genetic studies (Mourant et al. 1978; Zoossmann-Diskin et al. 1991) indicate that the Ethiopian Jews are similar to other Ethiopian populations, exhibiting a genetic profile that represents admixture between African and Caucasoid (probably Mediterranean) groups. The genetic evidence also suggests that the African contribution was introduced more by females and that the Caucasoid contribution was introduced more by males (Zoossmann-Diskin et al. 1991). However, results from Y-chromosome studies on a small ($n = 17$) sample of Ethiopian Jews (Ritte et al. 1993) are not entirely consistent with this hypothesis: 16 (94%) of the male individuals were shown to possess 49a/TaqI haplotypes Ht32 or Ht33, which are rare or absent in both Negroids and Caucasoids (Torroni et al. 1990; Spurdle and Jenkins 1992), and Ht33 is found at notable frequencies only in Khoisan populations (Spurdle and Jenkins 1992). These findings would seem to suggest either that the study on Ethiopian Jews was subject to sampling error due to the small sample size or that tremendous genetic drift has taken place in this largely endogamous group. The currently available Y-chromosome genetic data do not support a close genetic relationship between the Ethiopian Jews and the Lemba. In conclusion, the historical facts are not incompatible with theories concerning the origin of the Lemba, and the Y-specific genetic findings presented here are consistent with Lemba oral history.

To the three above mentioned conflicting theories of origin postulated by Connoway, Hendrickx adds more theories of the origin of the Lemba: a Bantu-speaking origin (Swahili, Venda, Shona, Muslim Yao, the Lamba of Zambia; an Indo-European origin and the so-called Azanian theory connected to the mysterious builders of Zimbabwe. Other scholars such as Nelson also classify the Lemba as a Bantu subgroup. Most of these theories are based on insufficient information and further research should be undertaken, which falls outside the parameters of this investigation.

Evaluation

It is clear that there is no consensus about the origins of the Lemba and no consensus will probably ever be reached. Various authors wrote within their own contexts of time and location, and for this reason, it is difficult to align the arguments of all these authors, and a clear link between the various oral traditions can also not be established.

What we can say is that the Lemba themselves, as well as all authors who studied them seriously, are in agreement that the Lemba constitute *a separate or distinct group* from the Bantu groups who are their hosts. The Lemba are especially distinguished from others by their customs, traditional religious practices, features, skills and aloofness. Many scholars hold that the Lemba have many customs with a Semitic or an Old Testament resonance.

From the sources used for the purpose of this chapter not much concrete information could be collected. In fact, the majority of historical data rest on speculative inferences, and some rest on traditions that cannot be verified.

However, the oldest oral traditions and written documents available (e.g. the Assyrian inscriptions, 700 BCE and the *Periplus*) refer to the pre-Islamic-Arabian (Sabaeen or Yemenite), Phoenician and Hebrew activities in Southeast Africa. At a very early stage, continuing influences between the Semitic world and that of the southeastern parts of Africa had a reciprocal impact on one another. Later documents (684-900 CE, e.g. the Arab and Portuguese) also refer to some kind of 'Moorish' people along the east coast of Africa. But from those written sources it is clear that authors were uneasy, or unable, to differentiate between, for example, Jews and Semites, Arabs and Muslims, Arabs and Swahili-speaking groups.

Exactly who the 'Moors' were and what the nature of their religion was, are therefore significant questions which are, as yet, only partly answered. The Africans for example called some of those groups 'Moors' or '*vaMwenye*' and occasionally they are called the 'Arabs' in works on Southeast Africa. Whereas the Portuguese found traders who, 'in features and appearance in no way differ from ourselves' (Theal [1898-1903]1964b:123-124), in Sofala the inhabitants were '*dark-skinned*' (Theal [1898-1903]1964b:123-4) and in the Angoche Islands were 'peopled by Moors and Kaffirs intermixed' (Theal [1898-1903]1964b: 217). In another account the 'Moors' are described as 'black men, and among them some are dark brown, some of them speak Arabic, and the others use the language of the country ...' (Theal [1898-1903]1964a:94). In 1505 a Portuguese noted that 'two pieces of cotton cloth' were the dress of '*white Arabs and slave owners*' (Freeman-Grenville 1962:107) and elsewhere, that the Zambezi was 'inhabited by heathen Kaffirs and Moors, *some black, some white, some of whom are rich*' (Theal [1898-1903]1964c:252). And Dos Santos describes the Moors as 'barbarians, and very fond of wine; ... *only Moors in name* and the practice of *circumcision*, as they *neither know nor keep the creed* of Mohammed that they profess' (Theal [1898-1903]1964c:330; [my

italics]). It is also striking that one of the earliest literary works (1721) which refers to the Lemba, namely the account by Mahumane, in no way describes them as 'Moorish' nor links them to the Muslim faith.

This information might point to these 'Moorish' or 'Arab' groups being 'Jewish', or rather Israelite, descendants coming from Yemen or even Israel or Tyre. It is as difficult to prove this issue as it is to refute it. Even names such as Sadiki or Seremane only stress the Arabic origin (or rather Arabian stay) of the Lemba, nothing else.

My field work report also shows that the conversion of the handful of Lemba to Islam in the Gutu area, is more the exception than the rule, and that the conversion took place very recently. In general the Lemba groups in South Africa, as well as in Zimbabwe, dissociate themselves from an Islamic-Arabic origin outright.

A further possible conclusion from the information above, could be that most of the references indicate the presence of people, mainly in the Zambezi region, possessing notably Semitic characteristics without being clearly Muslims. It seems reasonable to assume that although the 'Moorish' or 'Arab' people were not specifically referred to, their traditions and customs were reminiscent of those people that we know today as Varembe ('people who refuse'); Mushavi ('trader'); Vhasoni (great word of Lemba women); Mwenye ('foreigner', 'Arab', 'white people' or 'people of the light'),⁴³ Malepa; Vha-Sena ('people of Sena at the Zambezi'); Vhalungu ('Europeans', 'non-Negros or 'strangers') or simply the Lemba or Balemba.

If they were the descendants of the Falasha, the question is, where did the Falasha come from or where did they get their Semitic customs? The Falasha could have come to Africa as Christians, but as part of those Christians who insisted on maintaining Jewish customs, namely the "Judaisers". In fact, if the Lemba were from pre-Islamic Arab groups or from Falasha-Abyssinian origin, it explains their affinity towards 'Jewishness', rather than to Islam. According to the genetic reports the Falasha have nothing in common with the Lemba or Jews in Israel.

Some studies conclude that where the Lemba's origin is dissected into its ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural elements, there seem to be, among others, Judaic *and* Muslim and Jewish *and* Arab elements (Mphelo 1936; Thompson 1942; Price 1954; De Vaal 1958; Hendrickx 1991; Parfitt 1992; Spurdle & Jenkins 1996). It is striking that a considerable number of scholars opt for both a Jewish as well as an Islamic source or influence.

To my mind, the Lemba are most probably of *composite origin*. As I have remarked, not a single so-called Islamic custom among the Lemba cannot equally well be explained by Jewish influence (as mentioned before). It is with remarkable obstinacy that the Lemba have preserved some habits and customs from these influences earlier in their history. Many scholars mention their anxiety (or even fanaticism) in preserving their tribal and ritual purity. It is indeed the preservation of a part of a very ancient type of religious

group which makes the Lemba so valuable for the historian of religion. When Islam emerged, the Jews of Yemen were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people. If the Lemba originate from the Jews in Yemen, the Yemenite community (Jews) in Africa is perhaps the only one that remained practically unaffected by intra-Jewish migration. Dates for the migration from Yemen, however, appear to be inconsistent, and those quoted for settlement *en route* to Southern Africa range from 450 BCE, to the 6th century CE.

In my opinion, no specific religious shift was made in their case, but the possibility exists that the Lemba do have archaic remnants of an ancient Israelite type of religion. In more than one respect these remnants could differ from what is expected of 'Judaism' proper.

The oral traditions of the Lemba and the historical, archaeological and genetic data constitute the possibility that the immigration of the Lemba to Africa could have taken place even before the Christian era, but more probably before the 6th century CE. Later migrations could also have occurred but this is equally difficult to determine. If we take the Yemenite Jews seriously, that they left Israel exactly forty two years before the destruction of the Temple, it seems that their descendants who at some time or other fled to Africa could still have possessed a type of religion that could have similarities with early Israel (before the exiles had taken place). Therefore, there seems to have been a historical link between the Lemba and Yemen. Influence from the Jewish or Israelite religion found its strongest expression in the Lemba culture, probably through their historical connection with Jewry or Israelites and even through Christianity. The arrival of Christianity most probably reinforced the ancient traditions and practices of the Lemba. The 'success' that the Christians had in the conversion of most of the Lemba could be as a result of their close relationship with the traditions, practices and lifestyle preached in the Bible.

From discussions with various scholars, I detect a total rejection of the possibility that the Lemba had Israelite forebears, in spite of the most recent scientific genetic findings and the concurring oral traditions of the Lemba. It is also striking that certain scholars are rather prepared to accept an earlier link with the Muslim faith than a Jewish or a Judaic-Arabic influence. Such a reaction could be a remnant of the idea that a 'primitive' culture cannot be compared to the more 'exalted' cultures in the Old Testament or Judaism.

That there are strong indications from various sciences about their origins, is indeed true, but it is impossible to say whether the Lemba had merely assimilated the comparison between themselves and Jews in their reflections on their own religious heritage. It seems, however, that their self-identification both evidences and conceals a much older and very complicated religious identity.

NOTES

1. Kenyon in Mullan 1969:136.
2. More recent archaeological inquiry questions, to some extent, the conventional dating of the Solomonic era.
3. Müller 1888:739,741; ANET 1969.
4. This indicates that the tradition may at least be 90 years old.
5. Hendrickx 1991:181; cf Gayre of Gayre 1972:94.
6. Cf the similar Lemba tradition; cf Hendrickx 1983:69-74.
7. As the Lemba tradition holds.
8. Josephus, ANT 12.8.7 §§387-388; 13.3.1 §§69-73; 13.10.4 §285; 14.8.1 §131; 20.10.3 §236.
9. Mullan (1969:137,138) remarks that these Zaid followers were almost identical in faith to the Sunnis (orthodox Muslims). According to him, the Lemba greeting 'Vhasoni' appears to be a corruption for 'Sunni' (followers of Zaid, orthodox Muslim).
10. Theal [1898-1903]1964b.
11. In Swahili, *wa-shenzi* = uncivilised people/heathen (cf Othenius 1938:70).
12. The so-called 'Emperor' who ruled a group of tribes from some stone-built centre such as Great Zimbabwe.
13. Theal [1898-1903]1964c:275-280; cf Schapera [1937]1946:5,6,13; Von Sicard 1952:170; Marole 1969:1,2; Parfitt 1995:3-5.
14. Junod 1938:14; Baines 1877:vi.
15. The Monomotapa ('Emperor' and the gods) of this period also bore the title of 'Mambo'; a title which would appear to have been in use among the chiefs of different tribes across the Zambezi (Mullan 1969:123,124; cf Möller-Malan 1953:1).
16. This sounds legendary, since it is improbable that only half a boat would sink. Obviously, it depends on what the boat looked like.
17. Cf Marole 1969:1.
18. That means 'governor' (Connaway 1978).
19. On the banks of the Zambezi.
20. Connaway 1978:33; cf Mathivha 1992.
21. De Vaal 1958:65; cf Bothma 1969:195; Connaway 1978:35,36.
22. De Vaal 1958:65; cf Motenda-Mberengwa 1940; Marole 1969:2.
23. Cf Othenius 1938:69.
24. Cf Liesegang 1977:163-181; but not Anderson [1887 & 1888]; also Thompson 1942; Mandivenga 1989; Hendrickx 1991:174.
25. Loubser 1988:6-9; cf Wentzel 1983.

26. De Vaal [s a]c:12.
27. The term 'Kafir' had very early 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 Bblack peoples were called 'Kaffirs' by the British (and the Dutch) this was perhaps a way to distinguish them from 'Hottentots' and 'halfbreeds' (Price 1954:32).
28. Cf the word *Mwenye* or *Mwenya* (another name for the Lemba) which means in the Swahili language 'one who owns something' (Othenius 1938:69).
29. Huffman 1984:593-612.
30. Mathivha, however, does not provide any reasons for this date.
31. Cf Lestrade [1927]1960:24.
32. Cf Fagan 1970:173-199.

33. [T]he founder of the Nyakavhi (also called the Razwimisani), a Lembas who lived at Vhuhindi Nyakvhi moved from Vhuhindi to mBila ya swoswe, a place between Mozambique and Rhodesia. He died at mBila ya swoswe.... His oldest son was called Seremane; he lived at Bela. He moved from there on account of commercial considerations to Tshilamba.... His son, Ngonga, moved.... to Makovha.... Ngonga's son, Lumunda, moved from Makovha in Southern Rhodesia to Venda and founded a settlement, Makovha, in commemoration of the Makovha in Rhodesia.

At Makovha in Rhodesia the Nyakavhis came into contact with the Venda. This was near Venda's Dzata in Rhodesia. On account of disputes the Lumunda left the Venda and moved southwards to the second Makovha south of the Luvuvhu River His son Netshapfumba, left Makovha because he was attracted to the gold mines at Tshinavheni (near Giyani in Gazankulu). At Tshinavheni Netshapfumba and his people practised their expertise as *goldsmiths and potters* the followers of the Nyakavhi moved under the leadership of Netshapfumba's son, Gangazhe to Tsoni.... His son, Ratundu, moved to the Makonde district in Venda, and settled at Matavhelami.

[Here] the Lemba wereas attacked by the Mphaphuli forces [and they] fled to Tshatsimba in Tshakuma. Ratundu moved back to Rhodesia where he settled under the captain Makuvhile After the attacks by the Ndebele of Moselekatse, his son, Phophi, fled from Mashona Land southwards to Vhufuli in Venda His son, Tongabona, moved from Vufuli to Makonde He had a son by the name of Vhusetsho Wilfred Phophi, who was his successor (Connaway 1978:35; [my italics and translation]).

34. 1931:248-250.
35. This word could also have been of Christian origin.
36. The set of *alleles* borne on one of a pair of homologous chromosomes. An *allele* is one of a number of alternative forms that can occupy a given genetic locus on a chromosome (Thomas et al 1998:33).
37. This is no valid argument since the Lemba as such do not consider the elephant as a holy animal.
38. Hendrickx 1991:12.

39. Hendrickx (1991:12) mentions that both Mullan (1969:138-139) and Van Warmelo (1974:82) incorrectly use Zaid, Said and Sayid, as alternative spellings of the same word.
40. Parfitt does not indicate what is meant by 'ancient Israel' or which period in history he has in mind.
41. Cf R C Samuelson, in Whiston, 'Josephus Antiquities of the Jews' (38-100 CE), a descendent from the Ethiopian people who had been assimilated into the tribes of Israel.
42. Von Sicard's book was based, in part, upon the notes of the missionary Rev J Othenius (1938). The latter was forcibly circumcised by the Lemba.
43. This is only one possible translation. In the Handbook of Nyasaland (1936) the Amwenye are referred to as descendants of the Arabs found by the Portuguese at Sena.