

CHAPTER FIVE

Religious experience among the Lemba and in early Israel

Although the Lemba belong to different Christian denominations, their *culture* – as they call it – reflects almost all the characteristics of their own unique religion, so much so that one may define it as a ‘syncretising Judaism’.

The purpose of this book is not to do any intensive exegesis of certain Old Testament sections, or to determine the historicity of various stories or customs, but to determine what early Israel’s experience was concerning certain customs or rituals and what role these played in the communities. It is accepted that the Book of Judges is the only direct written source of information for early Israel (before the monarchy) and that it can therefore be used only with great circumspection as the main source.

Many possible theories or models could be used in the study of cross-cultural human beliefs, but variants of some of Smart’s categories prove useful in exploring the religion of early Israel (before 1000 BCE) and comparing it to that of the Lemba. Smart (1983; 1989; 1995), a scholar in the field of comparative religions, suggests that we should study religion under the broad heading of ‘worldview’ (sic), a term that refers both to traditional religions and ideologies. Niditch (1997:4) endorses the point that ‘Worldview [sic] analyses’ [seek to]

understand the symbolic patterns that serve as templates for the patterns of our existence, the contradictions and tensions in life as well as potential resolutions, the chaos that threatens and the order we seek. Such symbolic patterns are acted out in ritual performance, retold in ancient-seeming tales, or encapsulated in proverbs or parables.

Smart points out that there will be variations in world-views even among those who understand themselves to be part of the same religious tradition. He divides world-view into several useful facets or ‘dimensions’ (1983; cf 1989; 1995). These dimensions have been adapted for the purpose of my discussion of the religious views and practices of the Lemba and early Israel. They are: (1) the experiential, (2) the mythical, (3) the ritual and (4) the legal or ethical. For practical reasons I have decided to deal with each of

these different categories or dimensions successively in different chapters (i.e. Chapters Five to Eight).

The *experiential* dimension involves direct experiences of the presence of God, the *mythical* dimension refers to the rich narrative traditions which symbolise the invisible world, the *ritual* dimension expresses, in a dramatic form, some of the symbols found in a group's myth and the *legal or ethical* dimension comprises a group's moral guidelines (Smart 1995:7-9). Niditch (1997) applies Smart's framework to the religion of ancient Israel and I find parts of her division useful as a framework for the following chapters. A comparison follows at the end of each of the different dimensions (in the ensuing chapters, beginning with Chapter Five).

The categories that Smart implements bring aspects of a comparison between the two religions to the fore, which would not otherwise have attracted any attention. It is unclear which practice or ritual belongs to which category. The various dimensions are often so intertwined in the various rituals and customs that it is difficult to extricate them from one another. This implies that one facet of religion could just as well be discussed under another heading. For example, circumcision, defined mainly as experiential, can also be categorised as a ritual and the story of the *ngoma lungundu* ('the drum that thunders') is equally at home in the experiential, the mythical or even the ritual dimension.

It is clear that various religions exerted an influence on early Israel and that still others exert an influence on the thought of the Lemba. In order to have a better understanding of the religion and world-views of these groups (the Lemba and early Israel respectively), one also needs to be aware of the possible influences of other religions on these religions. This aspect does not fit into the framework by Smart so readily, but it will be referred to throughout and I shall briefly treat it at the end of this chapter.

Smart (1983:21-25) explains the *experiential* dimension as 'the direct experiences of the numinous [by means of] visions, trances, messages from God or more subtle indications of a divine presence'. These experiences or emotions of men and women feed or carry the other dimensions of religion: for example, *ritual* without compassion or feelings is lifeless, *myths* which do not move hearers are feeble and the application of *laws* without keeping in touch with people's emotions is irrelevant. In fact (as I have already mentioned), many of the practices or events discussed under this dimension are very closely related to one another and they are not easily categorised. A brief introduction will summarise the different *conceptions of God (or the numinous)*, within the communities of the Lemba and of early Israel. How a community *experiences* God is indeed reflected in its concept or understanding of God.

Religious experience among the Lemba

Conceptions of God/gods¹

The way in which God is perceived, as a result of various encounters, reveals numerous nuances which vary according to a people's world-view (Niditch 1997). Different groups and individuals often have different names for God, and these reflect their different concepts and experiences of God. During my interviews with Lemba people, it occurred to me that their concept of God was probably to a large extent influenced by their church affiliation or exposure to Christianity or to other religions (e.g. Islam, Judaism). Except for one interviewee, all the Lemba people indicated that they believed in God and according to them most of them are Christians (so-called Messianic Jews).

In spite of many different church affiliations and resultant conceptions of God, there appears to be very little religious intolerance amongst these people. Even when they completely differ from each other on certain points, they will never interrupt one another, or indicate their disagreement, except when asked directly. I never experienced that they were confrontational, nor were they affronted by something someone might have said.

The first interview I had with a Lemba was with the retired Professor Mathivha, President of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA; in 1995). He avers clearly that the Lemba people

believe in the God of Abraham, the God of heaven who controls all things the Lembas don't worship ancestors as has been mistaken by the early missionaries. The ancestors are the mediums to God. They get the message to God ... even the Jewish use Jacob, Isaac and Abraham ... they did not pray to their ancestors. People mistook things without understanding them ... we are different from other tribes The religion of the Lemba is centred around the God of heaven (D:1:B:24,25; cf 1992).

In this regard Mathivha makes an interesting comparison between the Lemba's cult of the ancestors and that of the 'Jewish people who, like the Lemba, did not *pray* to their ancestors.' It is obvious that he may have read some of the accounts by the early missionaries and others² and that he does not agree with their interpretation of the Lemba's way of worship. This remark encouraged me to investigate the role that the forefathers played in ancient Israel.

When speaking to the people at the grass roots level, one often obtains a different picture. I experienced the respondents as very genuine and honest and it was evident that nobody had been influenced beforehand regarding what to say in order to provide the 'correct' answers. The following are answers given to various questions during the field research. I could have provided many more quotations and references, but, owing to constraints of space, the few examples provided below demonstrate the variety of

answers that were received. Some interviews were conducted within a group context and others individually (more detail on each of the respondents may be found in the list of participants at the end of the bibliography).

During a group interview, different respondents, at Mamone (Sekhukhuneland), answered the question 'What is your perception of God?':

- (i) God is my mother and my father. My ancestors. I don't know any other God.
- (ii) We've heard about God but we don't know him.
- (iii) We just know it's Modimo (D:3:C[1]:2-4).

Here three different answers reflect three different perceptions and these are very closely tied up with these people's experience of God in the past. Many of the respondents experience God as one would experience a parent – as close and caring, in other words, with a feeling of nearness and safety. However, the experience that God is a parent can also be accompanied by fear, especially when the person has not acted correctly, or transgressed certain rules. One may read an influence from the traditional African 'cult of the ancestors' into this.

Participants (in a group interview) in Mogabane (Sekhukhuneland) responded:

We have just heard of God, but we believe in God because whatever we ask of God, he gives. The other thing that we know and we are thankful to God, is that God gave us all the parts that we have, starting from our hair; the head, the hands, the mouth and all these parts. God made them for us to be able to use them ... if we use them we will be able to work to get food to eat (D:5:1).

These people believe because they *experience* results to their prayers. They experience that whatever they ask they receive. They also experience God as the Creator, the Provider and One who cares for them. This consequently engenders a feeling of gratitude.

Chekure (a very devoted Christian lay-preacher), one of the participants in Gutu, Zimbabwe, said:

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

Foremost in this remark is the notion that belief in a life of dedication to God and Jesus Christ brings about a change in the way one lives. The Creator God described here is in control. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to earth and that which He came to do on earth, according to Chekure, has had implications for everyday practices and customs. The influence of missionaries clearly emerges in this answer.

One of the High Priest's wives at Mberengwa (Zimbabwe) experiences God as

very great. I see God as a great thing because there is nothing that I can do in my life, which is very important, without God. If God is in control of everything that I do ... then I know things will go well in my life (D:B:6).

The greatness and importance of God's role in her life is accentuated and her *experience* is that God is in control, that He is good and that He can accomplish things for her. She is also a professing Christian.

The Priest himself has a quite different opinion and replies that

what confuses us Africans now is that we don't have a picture of God. So we don't know what God is like. But in every picture that we are seeing nowadays, God is a White person. So we think that maybe God is a White person. If we don't rely on the pictures that we see which are painted white, we say God is that God who moved with our ancestors. He inspired our ancestors and revealed himself to our ancestors Some people call him Dandanakutanda or Dzivaguru. But that is only attribute names, but we call him Mwari (D:C:3).

The priest is much more sceptical about Christianity than his wife and he rather sees the Lemba as Israelites, who have to live according to Old Testament guidelines. The need is expressed to be able to see God, since he could only experience God and has never seen him – the presentations of God in Christian books confuse him. These do not concur with the Lemba's image or experience which they formerly (before colonialism) had of God in their minds. For this reason he does not trust these pictures, but rather the experience of God which they had in the past – that God who revealed himself to them and to their ancestors. In other words, that which they *heard* and *experienced* from their ancestors means more than that which they now see from the White people. The priest explains the names for God, which tell of his attributes: *Dandanakutanda* means 'extending over and over' and *Dzivaguru* means 'big pool'.

Mutazu (a Lemba), a Muslim *imam's*,³ perception is that

the Vãremba believe in God who created man. We call him Musika Vanhu. We have learned more about him when we read the Bible also. That God who is mentioned by the Christians and we the Vãremba and the Muslims, is one God. But in Arab they can call him Allah it is the Old Testament which governs us, and the way we

live is pending to Moses only, but we are told to believe in all or to take all the messengers of God who were sent by God. So the New Testament also have got some words of God and also the Old Testament has also words of God (D:O:7).

It is striking to me that Mutazu, who is trained in the Muslim faith, emphasises that the God of whom one reads in the Bible is the same as the God of the Lemba, of the Christians and of Islam. The importance of the Old Testament and association with it, as well as the role of Moses, emerges very pertinently in this statement, despite his being a Muslim, but most Muslims would hold this.

In general the respondents perceive God as their mother or father, the provider, the creator and the one who is in control. To some He is the one who moved with and inspired their ancestors. Others perceive God as the One who became flesh in Jesus Christ. Interviewees in Venda mostly referred to God as *Jehovah* (F:1:1; F:2:1) while in Sekhukhuneland they call God *Modimo* or *Morena* (the Northern Sotho name for the supreme deity; cf D:3:A[1]:8; D:3:C[1]:3; D:5:1; D:H[1]:6). In Zimbabwe the Vãremba speak of *Jehovah* (probably Christian influence), or of *Mwal/ri* (the supreme god of the Shona, around which they weave their entire culture; D:D:5).

The influences and elements of various religions, namely the African traditional religions, traditional Christian religions, the religions of the African Independent Churches, as well as the Muslim faith, are reflected in these quotations.

After between a hundred and two hundred interviews, I found only one person who indicated that he did not believe in a God at all. But for the rest it is no easy task to determine specifically what the Lemba's conception of God is, since it obviously varies from group to group, and even from one individual to another. In brief, it seems as though the concept of God among the Lemba has three facets.

First, there is the concept of *Mwari* (Shona) or *Modimo* (Sotho, the Supreme Being) which they knew long before they heard about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The ancestors are seen as mediators through whom communication with *Mwari* or *Modimo* takes place. Although not all Lemba are committed to the cult of their ancestors, most of them still are. Their belief in God has been preserved with that aspect of *Mwali* (*Mwari*) worship which emphasises God's sacredness and uniqueness. *Second*, there is a Semitic related deity, also known as *Mwari*, *Modimo* or *Jehovah* – the God of the Bible who also contributes to their concept of God. And *third*, there is the New Testament notion of Jesus, the Son of God and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Christ and the Spirit are seen as subordinate to the Father because Lemba relational figures always seem to be either super- or subordinate. Relationships with other people in their communities are usually hierarchical, hence their understanding of Christ being lower than the Father (Daneel 1997).

The general impression obtained from the interviews is that all the Lemba (traditionalists, Christians, Muslims and others) agree that the God whom they have known and experienced for a long time (especially through their ancestors), is the same God about whom they have heard of now, from missionaries, ministers or from whoever. The Lemba also have a particular affinity and sensitivity for the Old Testament 'which governs' them.

Covenant-making with men

The High Priest, Zvinowanda, in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe, stressed that the circumcision ceremony is the occasion where 'newcomers' become part of the covenant with God/*Mwali* (D:A:4). The circumcision ceremony as such, will be discussed as ritual (cf Chapter 7), but it could as well have been discussed here. The *making of a covenant*, an act between God/*Mwari* and the male Lemba, is however discussed under this rubric of the *experiential*. In accordance with entering into the covenant, it is accepted that God is making an agreement with them and that they will *experience* his presence in that.

To the Lemba High Priest, the most important section of Scripture is Genesis 17 (making the covenant between God and Abraham as an eternal Covenant). Runesu (D:L:8) confirms that 'we are the *children of Abraham* in our faith, but in our own tribe and how we were born, we are really Lemba people by birth and Abraham is our father. Our *covenant* applies to us that we are the children of Abraham and God' ([my italics]; cf D:O:7,10,11).

The fact that the Covenant is specifically connected to male circumcision among the Lemba communities suggests that making a covenant belongs to males, but it also has implications for the other members of the communities. According to the Lemba perspective, the Covenant is a manifestation of a relationship between Israel (they are also part of Israel in their view) and with God, in which there are specific obligations for both partners. It is in view of the particular making of the Covenant that they experience themselves (and others who see them as such) as 'chosen people', 'the Good Men' or 'a holy people'. Furthermore, other groups are seen by them as 'heathen', with whom they do not eat or intermarry.

Ngoma lungundu ('the drum that thunders')

There is a Lemba saying: 'Once we had a *drum* because we were a holy people' The narrative behind this story of *ngoma lungundu* (the name refers to a particular sound of the drum) and the emotion of the specific *experience of God* behind it, classifies this narrative as experiential (cf *Photo 6*).

It is recorded by Möller-Malan (1953:1-7) that the *ngoma lungundu* (some say it was made of ivory) was at one stage located somewhere north of the Limpopo in a mountain,

where the Lemba and the Senzi (Venda) lived together and experienced the sound of the sacred drum with *awe and fear*, since it was perceived as the voice of the great god, *Mambo wa Denga*, 'king of heaven', speaking to them. For many days they felt afraid as they had been aware of the far away rumbling of the earth. Many of them fainted at the sound of the voice, and the fear of the others grew with the increased shaking of the earth and the blazing of fire against the black smoke. Although many of the other people died, nothing happened to the Lemba, as they lived devoted to Mutumbuka-Vhathu, their father.

For a long time the *ngoma-lungundu* was heard no more and then one day the high priest, Dzomo-la-Dzimu, received instructions to beat the drum in a special way. The Lemba say this happened in approximately the year 1700 (during the month of July), just after the harvest (perhaps during their annual harvest festival). In the evening of the full moon, the alarm came from the royal enclosure: *Ngunduu! Ngunduu! Ngunduu!* The people trembled with fear once again, as they saw flames coming from the sacred places which were the dwelling place of the ancestral spirits, coming nearer to the shrine where the drum was, kept together with all the sacred amulets and weapons of the gods. Nobody was able to save the sacred objects since everyone was only trying to save themselves. As a result everything burnt to ashes. The Lemba went to the sleeping place of the king himself, reciting praises and prostrated themselves before the place. Then all of a sudden a voice spoke with the roar of thunder, ordering them to go back and call Tshilume, the Virtuous. After a while a voice was heard again, which ordered Tshilume to take his people and depart from that country and make their way to the South. He said: 'There you will settle and govern the whole of the country beyond the Vembe [Limpopo]' (Möller-Malan 1953:1-7; [my insertion]).

Mutumbuka-Vhathu gave his son (Tshilume) a small drum which he called by the same name of *ngoma-lungundu*, 'which possessed all the magic and killing powers of the old drum, also the spears and banner of royalty and many badges, white cotton garments and the *madi* and *denga* royal beads' (Möller-Malan 1953:1-7). *Madi* means 'blueish water' and *denga* means 'heaven'. Together they are 'blueish beads which came from heaven.' These beads were worn by the high priest as a distinction of his rank and he put those beads around his neck especially during the circumcision ceremonies. Mutumbuka-Vhathu also said:

Call the Lemba to carry these things, and take charge of them on the journey to the south Do not fear, for everything will go well. For have you not in your midst the magic drum? Beat the rain-making drum and all that is alive will be seized with fear and fall down as if in death, all excepting yourselves (Möller-Malan 1953:1-7).

Indrisi [circa] 1150 records that the Senzi (Zanji people), possessors of the *ngoma lungundu*, were in fact forced from their territory and down into the Sena area (on the Zambezi; cited in Mullan 1969:73-76). These people of the magic drum, calling

themselves the *BaSenzi* (probably the Venda), at that stage became closely associated with the Lemba in the same area.

Some believe that the original drum (*ngoma lungundu*) which helped them on their journey from Sena might still be in one of the caves on Dumghe Mountain in Zimbabwe or perhaps somewhere in the Soutpansberg area. But they are very secretive about its whereabouts. The fact that the – for some fearsome – drum may still be in the mountains, but guarded very well, not only keeps the traditions alive, but also contributes to the *experiences* of the mysterious, of the supernatural powers or influences, linked to the drum. In fact, the Lemba see the drum as a *symbol* of their deity's presence.

Although the Lemba themselves do not mention a parallel between their drum and the Ark of the Covenant, many scholars and observers do refer to such parallels. In his book *Ngoma Lungundu* (The Drum of the Ancestors), Von Sicard examines the parallels between the *ngoma lungundu* story and the Old Testament story regarding the Israelite Ark of the Covenant (cf Ex; 1Sm 3; 4) and those between *ngoma lungundu* and the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast* ('Splendour of the Kings,' 1952:170-175) – in order to prove his theory on how the Old Testament traditions entered the former Rhodesia. The 13th century *Kebra Nagast* 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 at 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 (for the Vhazendji) with them the sacred drum down towards Southern Africa.

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

Zvinowanda, in Mberengwa (D:A:6), assured us that he cannot tell us what he knows about the sacred drum (*ngoma lungundu*) 'because we are not allowed to reveal to people who are not circumcised....' but he did inform us that they know

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

This answer of course avoids the issue by spiritualising it. I never had the impression that the Lemba themselves replaced the Ark of the Covenant by the drum, or *experienced* it as such. Marimazhira (D:G:2:6) averred: 'I wouldn't talk of a *sacred* drum but we had our drums and the drums were sacred in the sense that they were used for religious celebrations'

From the narratives it could possibly be inferred that the narratives of the *ngoma lungundu* already existed very early in the thought-world of the Lemba and of Venda (Senzi); however, the link to the Ark of the Covenant was possibly only suggested later by Jewish groups or missionaries.

Nevertheless, such *experiences of the divine* (as described above), associated with fire or other violent manifestations, are quite pervasive in their traditions (cf Niditch 1997:47,48). These examples reflect and facilitate obtaining a clearer picture of certain threads in the world-view of the Lemba: in the relationship between divine and human each partner has certain rights as well as responsibilities (cf Chapter Eight).

Mountains, rivers and other sacred places

In order to describe the spirits around the people (especially the Romans), Otto (1869-1937, in Smart 1989:13) uses the term 'numinous'. These spirits are present at brooks and streams, mountains and other dwelling-places and they are to be treated with 'awe and a kind of fear'. Otto portrays this as 'a mysterious something which draws you to it but at the same time brings an awe-permeated fear' (cited in Smart 1989:13).

The spirits or *experiences* of the divine surrounding the Lemba are often present on, or associated with mountains, rivers and symbols (e.g. the *ngoma lungundu*) and are indeed treated 'with awe and a kind of fear'. It is evident that the Lemba have a special enthusiasm for sacred hills, rivers and a few other places. They firmly believe that *Mwali* (God) invariably guided them by means of a star from mountain to mountain. The last two mountains in Zimbabwe to which they had been guided and where they had settled are the Dimghe and Mberengwa⁴ mountains in Southern Zimbabwe. This might be one of the reasons why they consider these to be sacred. From the dwelling of the High Priest Zvinowanda in Mberengwa, we could see the towering mass of *Dimghe* (cf Photo 7) and he confirmed that the Dimghe mountains are

very sacred ... you cannot just climb up there If you climb on top then you were going to be mad and then sometimes you would not come back to your home. So this mountain, they [the Lemba] were born here and lived here. It is a mountain

they know that is so sacred to them and their ancestors, some of them are buried there The river that is coming from the top ... doesn't get dry during a dry season or whenever there is drought. It can't get dry it is a blessing from God given to the Lemba people around here (D:A:1-4; [my insertion]).

Likewise the Mberengwa Mountain (and Buchwa, D:M:5) has a very special meaning in the lives of the Lemba people. Many refer to this mountain as the 'Mountain of Good Men' (meaning the Lemba) that has two outstanding features: 'It could set itself alight [mainly in October, cf D:M:5] and it could roar like a lion. The name is therefore explained from *yaka berengwa*, which means "it was considered peculiar"' (Parfitt 1992:142; [my insertion]). It is also a burial place for their ancestors, which is probably why they consider it sacred (D:M:3). According to another tradition, two groups of Lemba first met at Mberengwa where they started counting each other to find out how many they were. Hence this is another explanation of the name Mberengwa, since *kuverenga* means 'to count' (Parfitt 1992:105). Strange and mysterious things took place in the valley in front of the mountain. There was a white lion which was sometimes seen, wailing sounds were heard, which people interpreted as the Lemba ancestors weeping for the land from which they had come and sounds like that of a moving car, but there was no car. If these rushing sounds were heard (among them, drums beating and cattle that bellow) over a period of seven consecutive days, it would certainly rain. One respondent tried to explain that the 'sounds that we hear are natural sounds which we call miraculous sounds, which we could associate with God' (D:M:4).

It is also in the foothills of the Mberengwa that the Lemba circumcision ceremony usually takes place. Mathivha (D:1:A:19,20) also stresses that you cannot go up the Mberengwa Mountain without being circumcised. Before you can climb the mountain you first have to fulfil

certain ceremonies and certain customs. You see we went there in the evening and you must do all these things so that in the morning then we can climb The priest will lead the relatives of descendants there. If a person goes into that mountain without permission you would get lost and you could not be able to come back again (D:M:3).

Some of the 'ceremonies and customs' Mathivha and others referred to included circumcision, but also confession of sin and other purification rituals, which had to take place before encountering and experiencing the divinity located in the mountain. It happened, for example, that the Reverend Othenius (1938), a European missionary, once dared to climb this holy mountain without permission, with the result that he was forcibly circumcised by the Lemba. The Lemba consider God to be accessible to all, but not just anyone may unconditionally ascend the holy mountain where God's presence can be overpowering. Other mountains of importance to the Lemba in the southern parts of Zimbabwe, are *Chilamba* and *Mapakomere* (Mathivha 1999a).

In Sekhukhuneland the *Leolo* and *White* Mountains, where the circumcision of the males and initiation of females respectively take place, are also considered sacred. Once a year, the people from India village in Sekhukhuneland also go up the *Leolo* Mountain 'to stay there and ... sit down ... to pray for rain' (D:3:A[1]:6,7). The *White* Mountain is sacred for another reason: The *Mohlotoane* River originates in this mountain (cf **Photo 21**). Chief Mpaketsane explains that '[i]t was a sacred river because the forefathers they sat down and took the *muti* to put in the river. The river was dry Over there right at the mountain they put a certain *muti* there. This river must always flow. And even now the river is still running' (D:3:A[1]:6,7).



Photo 21 *Mohlotoane River near India Village, Sekhukhuneland*

The latter is almost exactly the same as the tradition that exists in Zimbabwe concerning the Dumbhe Mountain and its sacred river (cf D:A:1-4). To my knowledge this tradition (of a mountain with a special river 'touched' by the ancestors) is purely oral: it is not written down anywhere in any account that could have enabled different groups to have added this tradition to their own world-view.

Similarly the *Shimbani* mountains near Mara (Ndouvada) in the Limpopo Province are of importance to the Lemba. The circumcision ceremonies are also performed there. The presence of a sacred river, the graves of the ancestors and the history mentioned above give these mountains a special meaning in the lives of the Lemba. At Ndouvada certain

trees are even considered sacred – the Lemba respected them as holy because their ancestors chose them to be holy (Mathivha 1999b).

The cult of the ancestors

The ancestors form a significant part of the spiritual world of the Lemba. In the world-view of most of them the dead live on in an underworld and have the power to continue to protect or punish them. This cult where they achieve a *trance-like communion* with their ancestors, forms part of their experiential world of the supernatural and of the divine dead.

After the first rounds of fieldwork (1995; 1996), I realised that I would have to adapt my interview guidelines in order to obtain a better understanding of the ancestral world of the Lemba. At first I did not obtain satisfying answers or clarity about the spiritual world of the Lemba and what Mathivha said about the role of the ancestors kept coming to mind. He, perhaps apologetically (D:1:B:24,25), stressed that the Lemba do not worship ancestors, as has been mistakenly believed by early missionaries and others, but that the ancestors are only the mediators of God in the same way as the Jewish people made use of the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in their prayers. He contends that they do not pray to their ancestors, but only use their names when praying. In retrospect, however, this seems to be only one side of the picture.

The response I received to the question: *Where does Jesus fit into your spiritual world?* confirmed the idea that Jesus might be seen by some as a kind of 'senior ancestor,' subordinate to the Father (or God) and this answer simultaneously revealed much of the function or the role of their ancestors. Through his honest way of explaining his religious experiences, Ratsoma (a Roman Catholic), one of the respondents, made an important contribution to my endeavour for a better understanding:

I pray to Jesus in the church. To Modimo who is a councillor of God ... it's still something different to me ... but it comes straight from my heart ... other times I try to kill something,⁵ a fowl or a sheep, goat go to the graveyard to do all this ... we take Bantu beer. All the family must come there and pray to God⁶ because we must tell the God that we are suffering and I want this and this. We eat all the food at the graveyard, we don't take it home

Before I go to church in the morning I first pray to my ancestors, telling them grandfather, mother, all - understand I go to church now, be good to us. We Lembas they are very good to us we believe in our hearts our ancestors, that is the basic praying for us. There may be some other one that we lack since we came from Yemen, but we don't know because cultural diffusion has taken place ... (D:3:A[1]:8,9; [my endnotes]).

Ratsoma experiences Jesus' presence in the church and the presence of the ancestors in the graveyard or at his special aloe-plant next to his house, where he prays to his ancestors every day (cf V:1:SEK). In other words there is a reciprocity between the two worlds. However, in his perception, the one world is not altered by the other, nor is it displaced. Ratsoma only recently embraced Christianity and he is still trying to marry the two worlds with one another. During the interviews which I conducted with missionaries at the Roman Catholic missionary station in Sekhukhuneland (with which Ratsoma, among others, links himself), it became clear that they experience no problems with the notion that 'the saints' or living dead intercede for one. Hence the possibility that Ratsoma can relate the two worlds to one another in such a way and yet find a link with the church.

And Mpaketsane observes:

As I am saying that the cultural diffusion has taken place and now we have a lot of beliefs. We just go to the church to talk about Jesus and read the Bible. Our culture is not in the Bible as far as the Lemba and the ancestors - the forefathers are concerned (D:3:B[1]:1).

Mpaketsane experiences that the ancestors or forefathers are part of their culture, but are not found in the Bible. The cult of the ancestors might be an influence from the African traditional religions, but it similarly might be a remnant of an ancient Israelite religion.

At India (Sekhukhuneland), a devoted young Christian woman explained that

[t]he Lemba culture are depending on the forefathers. They like forefathers more than God. My grandmother says they like God, they like forefathers ... if they need something like rain they go into the graveyard and then at the grave they ask rain to fall, they ask the forefathers. That's why they are praying and then that rain it really comes. That's why they do pray to the forefathers maybe. If they ask something from them they get it. That's why they like the forefathers very much (D:I[2]:8,9; cf D:3:A[2]:6,7).

Reflecting her own beliefs the respondent remarked:

I was baptised in 1982 Since [then] I believe in God only [now] you must choose. If you believe you must believe in God only (D:I[2]:8,9; [my brackets]).

The respondent implied that her people have success with the ancestors, that this practice is familiar to them and that it is for these reasons that they remain so very faithful to this cult, but she herself made the choice to believe only in one God and she believes that this is how it should be. It is probable that it is the faith of her church (Apostolic Faith Mission) which causes her to believe thus. It possibly also reflects

something of the way in which she sees the ancestors as the 'divinely dead'. If they did not exist in her world-view, or were not a threat to her, it would not have been necessary to choose.

From the group that was interviewed at Mamone (Sekhukhuneland) an old man replied:

I just know about my mother and my father I don't know God and does not even know the flesh of Jesus (D:3:C[1]:3).

And a woman in the group (at Mamone) said,

we also believe in ancestors but Jesus Christ we know as the Son of God ... it may be through the God who gave me my mother [who is dead]. My ancestor might give me a child and then I am sure that therefore the child is from God through her mother We pray in this way. Firstly we ask from our mother, from our parents, meaning the ancestors and after we pray we end in the name of Jesus Christ hoping that Jesus is related to them (D:3:C[1]:4).

A syncretism with 'cult of the ancestors' and the Christian religion is evident here, but the ancestors especially play a role in securing a posterity.

A participant in Mogabane pointed out:

We believe that the gods [the ancestors?] are immediate ... to the people. From them the prayer goes to Jesus and from Jesus to God. They give whatever they want to the God and then God say to Jesus (D:5:2; [my insertion]).

In this case the role of the ancestors as *mediators* between the Lemba and God is portrayed. Once again, Jesus is portrayed as a kind of senior ancestor.

Hwingswiri (Gutu district, Zimbabwe) explained that 'the ancestral spirits and God himself are the same' (D:N:9) and the priest in Mberengwa is convinced that God is the One who moved with their ancestors (southwards), who inspired their ancestors and who revealed himself to them (D:C:3).

According to many respondents, the Lemba are mainly Christians (very few have become Muslims) in South Africa and Zimbabwe, but many are also still traditionalists. Mandivenga says 'they still practise *mandiras* (cult of the ancestors) and so on, they behave like any other Shona in many ways in terms of ancestors' (D:Q:13). Mandivenga (in Harare) experienced that

the Reformed Church ... are the ones who in the beginning said no songs outside the hymn book. If you sing traditional songs ... the Mashabi or tribal spirit will get into you and then there will be no space for the Holy Spirit and that kind of thing. It is one of the churches which changed its attitude of encouraging people to

change their customs I certainly think that those Christian churches which try to accommodate local culture have found it worthwhile to do so (D:Q:12).

The interviews provided insight into yet another aspect of the Lemba: images of the *experiential*. They achieve a *trance-like state*, or communion with their ancestors, by following specific ritual actions at specific places. Beer-drinking, slaughtering an animal in a *kosher* manner, using secret words, prayers, songs and repeatedly calling the names of the ancestors, play an important role. During this trancelike state they often tell the ancestors about their suffering, asking them for rain or whatever they need. All these elements contribute to the experience of the otherworldly. As the process continues some of the participants might scream out in a loud voice, suddenly receiving insight into matters. My impression is that the ancestors do not necessarily speak to their descendants (to provide this sudden insight) but that they do answer their requests in one way or another. In all modesty and innocence, Ratsoma explained that he had more success with the ancestors thus far than he has had with God, but he is willing to learn.

The high priest (and others) explain that they 'have got *secret words* which must not be revealed to people ... it is a *different language* which is the language left to us which we inherited from our forefathers when doing circumcision' (D:A:10). Secret words or songs are generally used during the circumcision ceremony, or burial practices. The use of 'secret words' or an exalted or strange language also intrigues the minds of Western people, and contributes to the experience of the numinous and leads to an *experience of feeling exalted*. This supersedes the experience of profane language. It is as if one can better lay hold of the deity and more direct communication becomes possible. The reasoning is usually: God is exalted and for this reason one needs to speak to him in an exalted language.

From this cult of the ancestors it is clear that the Lemba do not believe that a person really dies. Instead, Mathivha explains: 'They do not die, they sleep' (D:1:B:24) Phophi says: 'To die is to go on a journey' (cited in Parfitt 1992:67). The fact that the Lemba communicate with the 'dead' in more than one way and during different occasions, also evidences that they do believe in a kind of hereafter.

This idea is further substantiated by the *Gshamo* ('to join the other spirits') ceremony which is held for the return of the spirits of the deceased. Mathivha referred to this special religious ceremony which takes place after the funeral. According to him this is a special ceremony held for a person who died in some far off place and who was buried by strange people. During the *Gshamo* that soul is brought back by one of the ancestors. If it is a Buba conducting the ceremony, the participants will specifically start calling out the names of the ancestors of the different clans: 'Is the Buba here?' then 'Is the Sadiki here?', 'Is the Hadzhi here?' and each representative will stand up and say:

'We are'. They usually start with the clan who is conducting the ceremony and then they will call out the names of the ancestors in the proper order.

In their world-view they believe that the dead live in a different place; this means that the dead can either help or hurt the living. Although it is not the general viewpoint, it so happens that most traditionalists see the dead as 'gods'. This view is probably tantamount to a religious devotion to the family.

Annunciations and other encounters

According to the information which I collected during my field work, it is not clear whether the Lemba still receive any specific annunciations or messages from the deity, such as they claimed to have experienced previously with the *ngoma lungundu*. But it is clear that they can still testify about so-called annunciations or guidance from the ancestors. Requests are specifically directed at the ancestors (such as, for instance, for rain or fertility) and they receive messages in a similar fashion. Both men and women communicate in this way with the spirit world. Mathivha writes that

it is the Lemba practice that only women can get 'Madlozi' (spirits of the dead) because the women always act in a manner which will resemble their old ancestors who were non-Lembas, i.e. the Lembas married foreign women when they migrated south in Africa after they had crossed the sea. The men represent Mwali as they are sometimes addressed as 'Muungu or Mulungu' which means 'God' (1992:46).

Ratsoma confirmed that his mother played the leading role in praying to the ancestors during the harvest festival (D:3:A[1]:8, 9), but he also referred to the possibility that the Lemba women (*vasendji*) might know more 'spirits of the dead' than the men, because the men are not originally from here but from Sena.

It is told that the Lemba's movements from one place to another during their migration southwards, were marked by an *experience* that God showed them the way by means of a star guiding them. Specifically how this annunciation or guidance was experienced is not known anymore.

In regard to the question of guidance by the Holy Spirit, the 'witch doctor' (as referred to by the Lemba themselves) in Mogabane, told me how the Holy Spirit once made him aware of people who wanted to cast suspicion on him by hiding stolen goods in his room. By means of a timeous warning, he could remove the stolen goods from his room and was not suspected of theft (D:3:C[2]).

Religious experience in early Israel

Conceptions of God/gods

After close scrutiny, it would appear that the Israelite concept of God was largely formed because of the *experiences* of God by their ancestors in the past, but also by the influence that the Canaanite and other religions had on them. All three of these traditions could eventually be linked to Canaanite agricultural feasts, whereafter they gained new significance for Israel.

The tradition of the *patriarchs* mainly deals with their relationship with El, God of the fathers and particularly with the eternal Covenant made between Abraham and God (Gn 17). He will be a God for them and they will be his people. Promises of a large posterity and a special country were also linked to this covenant.

Freedman (1987:330) states: After many adaptations and much shedding of blood (Ex 32), it was accepted that Yahweh (the God of the Covenant) was El. Therefore Freedman is of the opinion that the events concerning the golden calf were an important phase in the development of Mosaic Yahwism.

I support the supposition of Deist (1985:36-37) that there is a continuation between the name of the patriarchs for God and the name given by those who participated in the Exodus. He explains that El and Yahweh should not be seen as two different gods, but as one. Does Deist postulate that even with the Israelite entrance into the land, El and Yahweh were experienced to be one, or was this only later? Although he does not expound this more clearly, the people who participated in the Exodus later probably did consider El and Yahweh to be one and the same God. Albertz (1994:30,78) points out that nowhere in the Old Testament is a polemic conducted against the god El and that the integration between the Exodus group and the Canaanites apparently took place without any problems. He stresses, however, that the El religion of the patriarchs most definitely was not identical to the developing polytheistic system of the city states of Canaan. De Moor (1990:223-224, 255-261) is also of the opinion that Yahweh and El became one God and that He was totally different from the old god Ilu, as he was known in the Ugaritic texts. He maintains that Yahweh-El possibly later took over the functions of Baal (cf Dt 33). He argues the case that Yahweh's name was already early linked to the name El and for this reason they were essentially the same God. This confirms the suspicion that the same God was indicated by different names. The El worship of the patriarchs could obviously also be a retrojection. Until their settlement in the land, everything remains rather uncertain.

Albertz (1994:48-49, 52) is of the opinion that the *experience* of the separation between Yahweh and the people became real after the settlement in the Promised Land. He maintains that early, before the settlement of the land, God's (El's) intervention was more directly or personally directed, but with the larger group (all the Israelite clans) it was different. Now a mediator was necessary. He thus accepts the role of Moses in the

history of early Israel – he was not the founder of Yahwism, but he became an important mediator. Albertz is convinced that in spite of the mediator, a personal bond between Yahweh and the larger group of people remained and that this is unique to Israelite religion.

According to the *Sinai tradition*, Yahweh appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, when He called him to deliver the people from slavery and again later when He gave Moses the Ten Commandments, by means of which the Covenant between himself and his people was reconfirmed (Ex 19-21). In this connection there are also some indications of a link between Yahweh and his region in the South. This area is called Sinai, Seir, the Fields of Edom, Teman or the mountains of Paran (Jdg 5:4ff; Ps 68:8ff; Dt 33:2; Hab 3:3). In Judges 5:5 and Psalm 68:8ff, Yahweh is given the name of the ‘the One from Sinai’ (Albertz 1994:51). Albertz argues that Yahweh had been worshipped for a long time already in the South, before he became the God of the Exodus group. He finds evidence for this viewpoint firstly in the Egyptian ‘Shasu texts’ from the time of Amenhotep III and Raamses II, that refer to ‘Yahweh in the land of the Shasu’ (a region probably to be found in the vicinity of Seir) and secondly in the reports in the Old Testament that refer to the connection between Moses and the Midianites in the South. Thus he argues that Yahweh is ‘older’ than Israel and that He could be described as the ‘South Palestinian mountain god’. Therefore it would appear that Yahweh was a God-from-the-outside (from the South), who at most only shared certain characteristics with the Ugaritic Baal.

Wolfe (1982:104) shows how Joshua, through his violent actions, gave a totally new dimension to the *experience* of the Israelites of God. Joshua repeatedly heard Yahweh saying: ‘Kill and destroy’ (Jos 10:20,28-39). And through this, Yahweh became a God of war – the War God (Albertz 1994:47). Albertz postulates that the Yahweh religion was especially directed at the needs of the larger group and that at that stage the religion was mainly politically oriented. He avers that the origins of Yahwism are ineluctably linked to the process of deliverance.

In contrast to most other ancient Near Eastern religions, where the emphasis was more on the *cultic experience* and less at the *historical level*, Israelite religion retained both these elements. The stories as they were experienced and shared by both groups, were in all probability part of their thinking and later automatically became part of the clans’ religious viewpoint and experience.

Covenant-making with men

According to the world-view of the Israelites, one of the most definite guarantees of their alliance with God, is expressed in his covenant with them (Gn 17; Ex 19ff). It is clear that the episodes in establishing His covenant with them, belonged to *males*. Exodus 19:5 commands that the males at Sinai were not allowed to touch women sexually, which

implies that the divine message is conveyed to and through men. This is in contrast with becoming one with the godhead, precisely by ritually enacting the sexual deed, such as in the Canaanite fertility religions in Canaan.

Be this as it may, a tradition that certainly contributed most extensively to the dimension of *experience* in the religion in early Israel was that of meeting God at Sinai. Albartz (1994:43-56) points out that no pre-Exilic prophet refers to the Sinai experience. However, according to him there is not yet a satisfactory solution or explanation for the presence of the Sinai pericope (Ex 19 – Nm 10) in the Pentateuch. He stresses that the references to the *theophanies* at Sinai (Ex 19; 24:1, 9-11; 24:15b-18a; 33; 34) repeatedly concur about their description of the majesty of Yahweh. On the one hand, God's *love* and the *involvement* of God with mankind was experienced, but on the other hand, also the *wrath of God* when He punishes sin.

The Ark of the Covenant

Apart from the established sanctuaries in Canaan, the Exodus group probably also brought a portable sanctuary into the land, which stemmed from their 'wilderness sojourn' – the Ark that was linked to the Covenant with Yahweh. It is very difficult to determine how old the stories surrounding the description and the existence of the Ark are, or how old the traditions are on which these are based. There are nevertheless, various traditions concerning the remembrance of a cultic object that was apparently of great significance for the Israelites on their journey through the desert and also in the period of the Judges. Old Testament sources (cf Dt 10:1-8; 31:9, for example) are too incomplete to provide clarity on this and to complicate matters further, the various traditions concerning the tabernacle, the Ark and the temple probably became intertwined and are therefore difficult to distinguish. Schmidt (1983:133) remarks that it is also no easy task to determine whether the Ark was possibly a 'sanctuary on wheels', or whether it was just linked to the sanctuary and whether it had perhaps even been taken over from the Canaanites. If it were to be accepted that some of the Israelite clans themselves came from Canaanite ranks, it is not improbable that they took the notion of the Ark over from the Canaanites.

Apparently, the Ark accorded importance to a sanctuary or a height which those places did not have previously. However, the reasons why it moved from the one sanctuary to another are uncertain (cf Jos 8:30; Jdg 20:27ff). There is no historical support for the notion that it rotated between them on a regular basis, although such a practice could still fit into the idea of a loose federation or segmentary community. The fact remains that the Ark played an important, mysterious and sometimes fearsome role in the military actions of the Israelite clans – namely that it symbolised the presence of Yahweh, without which there would have been no victory (Jdg 3:28; cf the sojourn of the Ark in Canaan, 1 Sm 1; 3; 4; 5; 14).

Albertz's (1994:57) viewpoint is that the Ark probably did not have cultic significance from the beginning, but that it was only a symbol that guaranteed the presence of Yahweh. He surmises that the Ark was only later considered as part of the sanctuary at Shiloh, and thereafter in Jerusalem as part of Yahweh's throne in the Holy of Holies. Furthermore, he maintains that the Deuteronomist accorded it the function of the 'bearer of the document of the Covenant' (or the Ten Commandments). If the idea of the Covenant is only dated much later and thus was retrojected onto this period, then such an idea could be considered. However, Noth ([1958]1983), Fensham (1969:v) and Gottwald (1985:28) maintain that the structure of the Covenant, according to which the Israelite clans had to organise their daily lives, had already been established much earlier in the pre-monarchic period.

Mountains, rivers and other holy places

A number of Old Testament texts (cf Nm 22:41; 1 Sm 9) suggest, among other issues, that the sanctuary as such played an important role in the history of Israel. A sanctuary was not only a place of worship, but apparently it was also a very important gathering place for the Israelite clans and possibly of the Levites (on their own; Jdg 4:6,12,14).

The sanctuary was probably also not the only place of worship, or not necessarily the original place of worship or holy place. Albertz (1994:57,82-88, 99-100) contends that the human-made sanctuaries or high places were initially connected to natural holy places such as *mountains, glades and fountains*. Such a venue was usually linked to a theophany, such as that at Sinai or Horeb (e.g. Moses). Alt ([1925]1966:150,327; from the perspective of infiltration), suspects that the Exodus group began to hold their cultic feasts soon after the settlement still in the desert, specifically at Sinai where they had special experiences, until they found a spiritual home in the land.

Although still no consensus about the precise meaning of a *bamah* has been reached, most scholars agree that it was a kind of open cultic place or high place. The fact that it was an open place could also have had an influence on Israelite religious thought, such as for instance the *metaphors from nature* for the description of Yahweh and so on. Nakhai (1994:20-21) surmises that the earliest reference to an open cultic place dates from the period of the Judges (Lv 26:30; Nm 33:52) and then has the meaning of a 'stage' for rituals, an open air cultic area, an altar or a temple (open air temple?). In this connection A Mazar (1983:39) maintains that the open air sanctuaries had been a permanent characteristic of the Israelite clans since the 'patriarchal period' (the dating of this period is uncertain, until the reforms by King Josiah in the seventh century BCE). According to biblical traditions the patriarchs erected altars at places such as Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Hebron and Beersheba. These altars were possibly erected later, but were linked in ancient Israel specifically to the ancestors.

Except for holy places and public open-air sanctuaries, Alberty (1994:99) also identifies house altars. He is of the opinion that the report about Michah's house altar (Jdg 17-18) was in no way an isolated case, but that it may possibly have been accentuated since this was such a luxurious setup. A typical example of a house altar from the tenth century was discovered at Megiddo.

Except for the River Jordan, Palestine does not really have any rivers of note.

The cult of the ancestors

In all of the important oral traditions of early Israel (as referred to above), the ancestors play an extremely important role. One of the most prominent oral traditions of the Israelite clans was indeed the stories about the relationship their ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) had with El, the God of the fathers and in particular of the eternal Covenant which was transacted between God and Abraham. It seems as if the ancestors almost fulfilled a type of mediation role between the clans and Yahweh. The Israelite clans could probably appeal to the good relationship between God and their ancestors – as if God would have been better informed as to whom He was dealing with, when the names of the ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) were mentioned. The Israelites learned from the traditions of the ancestors that God was highly exalted, that He performed mighty deeds in the past, that He was faithful to his covenant, that he appeared to them and that He communicated with them.

Van der Toorn's (1996:206-266) extensive investigation into the 'cult of the ancestors' in the Old Testament yielded remarkable results. Scholars agree that later editors especially stripped biblical records of references to the cult of the ancestors (cf Niditch 1997:46-48). If not, these allusions are disguised and obfuscated in written records – compare for example Exodus 21:6 with the much later Deuteronomy 15:17, where the reference to 'gods' is left out (where a slave is supposed to be presented to his gods or forebears). The editors of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), perhaps on purpose, did not include such references in the canon and did not record them as they happened, since cults of the dead were not considered to be part of Yahwism (cf Dt 18:12).

However, the social framework within which this cult functioned, as well as the texts where the prophets polemicised against it (cf Lv 19:28; Dt 18:11-12), permeates many passages. For example, in 1 Kings 21:3 the reference to the 'inheritance of the father' explains the ineluctable link between land and ancestors. Van der Toorn states that places named after ancestors, whom later inhabitants believed still lived there (cf Jos 15:56; 17:11-12; 19:12,14,18; Jdg 1:27) and the concern for the survival of the names of the dead, were deeply rooted in the mind of early Israel (cf 2 Sam 18:18). Also, practices to bring about ritual communication between the living and the dead (Dt 14:1-2; Ps 16:2), as well as sacrifices to the dead, were not unknown in Israel (Dt 26:14; Tobit 4:17). There were numerous vituperations against Israelite practices.

Van der Toorn is convinced that early Israel believed that forsaking the 'cult of the ancestors' could have caused the living to lose their innate right to the land and therefore, for the welfare of his family, the head of the family would have been advised not to neglect this 'cult'.

Research done on the Babylonian cults (Van der Toorn 1996) could shed more light on the frequency of sacrifices to the dead. Families came together monthly, during the absence of the moon, for a feast, which included offerings to the ancestors. The banquet for the royal family in 1 Samuel 20 could perhaps be seen as such. This gathering had a ritual character, the participants were ritually clean and it was held at the end of the month.

Furthermore, Van der Toorn (1996:225) is convinced that in the Old Testament the ancestors were very much seen as 'gods' (*elohim* or *elim*; or shades, '*repa'im*'); Genesis 31:30 refers to Rachel, who stole Laban's gods (e.g. the *teraphim*); in 1 Samuel 19:11-17 Michal used the *teraphim* as a substitute for her sick husband (David); the *teraphim* were material objects that were manmade and could be transported (Jdg 17:5); Zechariah 10:2 says these gods 'speak vain things' and in Ezekiel 21:26[21] the Babylonian king consults the *teraphim* during a military expedition. Deuteronomy 18:11 probably describes the programme underlying Josiah's religious reforms: He 'destroyed the ancestor spirits and the soothsaying spirits and the *teraphim*.' Van der Toorn argues that the domestic *teraphim* or figurines represented the ancestors. The dead were very much alive in the Israelite world-view and it was a daily reminder to the *family* of its own past and *identity*.

Archaeological evidence substantiates the theories of Van der Toorn: Many images or figurines were found in houses and at Israelite shrines during excavations. But it has not been established whether the household gods really refer to ancestors. The household gods and other cults did really exist, but these were not necessarily part of their official religion.

From an analysis by scholars, of personal names found in the Hebrew Bible, a significant number of names use certain kinship terms such as 'father' (*abi*) and 'brother' (*ahi*). Van der Toorn contends that these terms actually functioned as designations of a deity, as in the case of theophonic personal names containing elements of El or Yahweh. It cannot be proven that *abi*, for example, signifies a known deity. From the studies of personal names Van der Toorn furthermore learned that the cult of the ancestors addressed mainly male ancestors, that the ancestors were supplied with food offerings, that they were indeed worshipped as gods (1 Chron 27:6) and that the ancestors intervened in the lives of their descendants in more than one way, such as in the bestowal of offspring (cf Jos 12:22; 19:11; 21:34). The details of this worship, such as prayers, mnemonic language and other rituals *experienced*, are no longer known to us. De Vaux (1973:61) also infers that Israelites probably believed in some kind of life after death (*sheol*/underworld), since they carried a lot of food to the deceased.

However, Van der Toorn (1996) admits that it is no easy matter to gauge the feelings and sentiments this cult inspired in the living and it possibly amounts to a devotion to the family. Some scholars even interpret the commandment to honour one's parents as relating to provision for ancestors after death (Brichto 1973:30-31). Niditch (1997:46-48) maintains that the divine dead were an essential thread in the Israelite world-view. The dead live on in an underworld existence and are very much involved in the lives of their descendants and have the capacity to help or hurt them. But on the whole the religion of Israel was not eschatological.

Annunciations and other encounters

Mothers usually play the role as primary receivers of the divine message and experience. It usually happens against the background of the birth or youth of a male hero. The recurring markers of the future importance of a child are the barrenness of the mother or the endangering of the child. Examples of divine annunciations from the patriarchal narratives would be Sarah (and Isaac, Gn 18), Hagar (and Samuel, Gn 16; 21) and Rebecca (Esau, Gn 25).

One would surmise that in a patriarchal setup, females would not be prominent, either politically, or in the religious arena. And yet, in the times of the Judges, women did act in public and contributed significantly to society. Bird (1987:401) shows how Deborah acted as a female prophet, how Jephthah's daughter initiated the annual commemoration event and how Hannah went to the house of the Lord alone to worship, to sacrifice and make a promise to Yahweh (1 Sm 1:1-28). Thus it appears as if (e.g. 1 Sm and Jdg at least) it was not only the privilege of men, as heads of families, to go to the sanctuary – women probably also participated in religious activities. According to Wellhausen (1958:94), their participation was not essential, so that it probably took up a less central role in their lives than in that of men.

Albertz (1994:33-34) also indicates the important role of women as recipients of promises (Gn 16:11; Jdg 13:3ff). One of the basic promises for the continuation of the family was most definitely the promise of having a son. He points out how remarkable it is that receiving this promise was repeatedly a typical female experience and concludes that although women were primarily excluded from the official cult, they did play a central role in the family worship.

Influences from different religions on the religious experience of the Lemba and early Israel

Regarding the diverse influences other faiths had on the religious convictions and life of the Lemba and also that of early Israel, Smart (1983; 1989) has, to my mind, not

devoted sufficient space to this topic. I have referred to the issue of the diverse influence of other faiths before and shall constantly return to it further on. At this stage, however, I feel it is necessary to point out some matters briefly:

Influences from other religions on the religious experience of the Lemba

African traditional religions

In more than one way, I have already referred to the strong influence of African traditional religion on the minds and world-views of the Lemba. It not only influenced the perceptions they have of God but also some of their particular practices and customs. The religion or culture of the Lemba is embedded in traditional African cultures.

Christianity

Church affiliations

Most of the informants indicated that they belong to some kind of Christian church, but generally saw no contradiction in believing in Jesus while insisting on having a Hebrew heritage. Their churches are very important in their lives, but as far as the Lemba as Jews or Israelites are concerned, church or religion does not seem to be the binding factor for them. They might be Jewish or Israelite but on the whole they do not cling to present-day 'Judaism', as such, so much as to their particular Lemba or 'Judaic'/'Hebrew' culture. They insist that their religious affiliation is not as important as their ancestral history. However, these Christian churches have a major influence on the concept they have of God and the Christian way of salvation.

From the very first interview I conducted (with Mathivha, 1995) I gained the impression that the Lemba's Jewishness (as some call it) is neither political nor religiously coloured, but rather cultural.⁷ Speaking of the LCA Conferences and other Lemba gatherings Mathivha confirmed:

[W]e have a culture and the communities are organised around culture. Church denominations don't matter there. All denominations are welcome and you find them all there. But we are not bound by church affiliation. We are bound by culture we have a communion to come together for sacrifice (in Zimbabwe) ... it's culture, the whole meeting is culture. Our people are Lutherans, others are Catholic, others are Presbyterian, others are Dutch Reformed.⁸ They are all there but when it comes to culture they are one (D:1:B:31,32; [my endnote]).

Ratsoma (D:3:B:[1]1; Apel, Sekhukhuneland) also mentioned some of the churches the Lemba belong to: 'We believe in different denominations.... We have different churches

like Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterians, Zion Christian Church and others. We believe in them' Only two Lemba have indicated that they do not belong to any church whatsoever. Most of the Lemba in the India village (Sekhukhuneland) are affiliated to the Apostolic Church or the ZCC.

Mpaketsane (D:K:4,7) commented:

My culture is very important, it is in a church in which I believe because I've been protected for a very long time I feel I was protected by God through that when I was praying with those under the church. And then my culture is my culture. I just want to adopt it [Christianity?] into my culture' (my insertion).

And Runesu replies (D:L:8): '[C]ulturally our Lemba customs are very important, but likewise, we take the church to be very important because of the salvation that we got from Jesus Christ.'

After our second visit to Sekhukhuneland it became clear that many Lemba people, especially in Mogabane, are joining the ZCC because, they say, their culture is very closely related to the rules of the ZCC:

If I can stick to my culture, it is very much important ... because ... the rules the Lemba people are applying are very close to God's need the rules that the Lembas are applying ... are just like the rules that are being applied in the ZCC church because the first priest in the ZCC was a Lemba. Rametsi Nomadi was the first priest in the ZCC church (D:K:4).

Most Lemba Christians, for example, conduct both circumcision and baptism ceremonies and still stick to many other traditional Lemba customs and practices, without any conscientious objection to them. Many other influences from the different Christian churches could have been mentioned here. However, such an in-depth investigation falls outside the purview of this research.

The influence of some Lemba practices on the Christian church

The Reverend George Murray and his wife, both retired missionaries of Morgenster and formerly from Buhera (Zimbabwe), told us that the Church (the Dutch Reformed Church) had for example taken over the idea of the *Makapola festival* from the Lemba. During this festival the first fruits of the harvest were offered to the ancestral spirits and prayers of thanksgiving were offered for having food to eat. When the church adopted this usage the custom was established of having Makapola festivals throughout the congregation at a particular time when the harvests had been reaped.

In every district people come together on a given Sunday and bring pumpkins, maize, wheat or money earned from selling the harvests as donations to the church. The produce is then sold and the proceeds are used as church funds.

I have mentioned that the Lemba receive *new names* during the initiation rituals without giving up their original names. Something of this has probably become established in the Gutu and other areas. Chekure told us that he had been given the name 'Israel' when he adopted the Christian faith:

It is a name when we are speaking of Christianity. It was a name derived from Christianity which I joined. I don't want to change that name because I was given that name by the time I switched from my traditional customs to Christianity (D:D:6).

In view of the Lemba cultural practice of changing names after initiation a change of name at conversion to the Christian faith is bound to appeal strongly to the Lemba.

Islam

A considerable number of scholars have, in one way or another, linked Lemba customs to the Muslim faith. In fact, in the early stages of his research, Mandivenga (1983, fn 60) was under the impression that almost all the Lemba in Zimbabwe had made a rediscovery of and conversion to, Islam. This would have taken place in the area of Gutu and would have fanned out from there. These inferences did not concur with those I discovered during my field study. Most of the Lemba vehemently denied any associations with or origins from the Muslim world. Furthermore, I could only find some who either accepted a possible resemblance to Islam, or who actually adhered to that faith (especially in the Gutu district in Zimbabwe).

Therefore, to my mind an important interview that I needed to conduct, was that with the Lemba head of the Muslim centre at Chinyika (Gutu district, Zimbabwe), Shaf Ali Mutazu. He received his training at the Islamic Institute, called Daruwen Hill, in Waterfalls, Harare. He informed us that the whole complex there was run by local Muslim organisations from Harare (D:O:1-3). They were helping the people at Chinyika by sponsoring the school fees of students, accommodation and food.

He is convinced that the Vãremba customs are very similar to the Muslim,

because the Islamic system of marriage ... the birth of a child, how we give him the name and burial customs [are almost the same] ... circumcision [in the Vãremba community] is one of the key factors which is done according to Islamic [practices] it should be the age of seven days. But now here in our area we don't have special doctors who can do it. So we take it if one is at the age of seven years or

eight years ... [earlier] people were just getting some names but when Islam was introduced we were getting some Islamic names ... like Yusufu, Dhanti, Mohammed, Umara' ... our Remba [Lemba] tribe is based on Muslim culture, because we were taught that when someone dies the first thing is to give a prayer. During that time when I was not circumcised, I started learning them. Now I am understanding them clearly ... Like the first prayer - it was a crooked language. They used to say sara sara vakadiya vakarima, Zhare zhare. Now when I started to learn Islam, [I discovered] it was the first chapter in the Koran. Now I can read it better than the way I was reading it in our culture the names of our forefathers are completely from Arabian language, Yakuri, Seremani. Today they are not all Muslims, some Vãremba have joined Christian churches (D:O:3-11; [insertions mine]).

Despite all the commonalities, Mutazu informed us that only one hundred and fifty of a possible two thousand Lembas in the vicinity, are practising members of the Muslim faith. I had the opportunity to interview a few Lemba who did not live far from the Muslim centre at Chinyika. Abia, for example, confirmed that

not all the people are bound to the Muslim culture. Some are going to different churches as well. The Muslim culture to them [those who attend the services] is more a culture than a religion it is not only the Vãremba people who go there, anyone who has interest to join is free to do so (D:N:4,5).

A respondent in Zimbabwe said:

According to our Remba [Lemba] tribe's custom we are allowed to mix with people who follow Muslim religion like the Vãchawa because these people are circumcised. Now by the virtue of being circumcised they are holy to us So because of history and time, the Muslims when we see them culturally they seem to correspond with us, that's why we accept them. But I think we are Jews (D:M:7-9; [my insertion]).

They might have something in common with Islam but clearly qualify these similarities. The concurrences with Islam referred to by Mutazu above, could just as well have been said of ancient Israel. Because of the historical as well as other relations between the religions, so much overlapping could be expected.

Modern Judaism

The current practices of the Lemba do not have much in common with present-day Judaism and I could not really find any significant influence in their recent past, except for the speech of Prof Windsor from the USA at the LCA in the late 1990's.

Nevertheless, after the recent genetic findings, Jewish groups from the organisation, Kulanu in America, sent Rabbi Abrami to South Africa (Jan 2002) to establish Jewish educational centres among the Lemba community in the Limpopo Province. Mainly, he tried to teach them some Hebrew, read from the Torah and explained the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith.

This historical conference was also attended by Prof Parfitt from London, Edith Bruder, a doctoral student from France, my family and a few other interested people. Only a few Lemba were able to attend the conference and the same group did not stay the whole week-end. Nevertheless, in all the enthusiastic Rabbi had an audience of about twenty people every day.

The reaction to his way of teaching was divergent. Some of the leaders like Mathivha, I suppose, got what they expected and apparently saw it as a milestone in the history of the Lemba. To a certain extent, to Mathivha, it most probably was like a dream that came true: a Rabbi teaching in a Lemba community. He was apparently not disturbed by the way the Rabbi totally abandoned and discredited all Christians and Jesus Christ. He actually said that the Rabbi only confirmed what he already knew. A few younger people, mostly related to Mathivha, in the beginning agreed with every word the Rabbi spoke. But when he later explained that exclusively those who have a Jewish father or mother and who are fully converted to Judaism might be called 'Jewish' according to the High Court in Israel, he lost a few enthusiastic followers. If they could not be called Jews, despite their 'proven' Jewish bloodline, it did not make sense to them anymore. Even Parfitt disagreed with the Rabbi about this definition of 'Who is a Jew?' He referred him to many Judaising groups all over the world who regard themselves as descendants of one or another tribe of Israel and to the many 'Jews' living in Israel who are not religious at all. Also, what about the statement of David Ben Gurion years ago when he said that whoever sees him/herself as a Jew, is a Jew. The Rabbi did not really give satisfying answers to these questions.

Even during the first day of the conference most of the younger people who are devoted to the Christian faith were totally confused and disturbed by the way the Rabbi discredited Christianity. The Christian leaders who earlier had regarded their Lemba customs and practices only as culture and a kind of hobby, were very concerned about the confusion caused by the teachings. Even they could have learnt much from the teaching of 'the thirteen principles of Judaism', but could not stand the way the Rabbi totally abandoned what was precious and dear to them. As a matter of fact most of the younger people and the leaders saw these teachings as a 'step backward' and asked for guidance of some sort to handle this confusion. Most of them did not turn up for the rest of the conference.

In my opinion the Rabbi could rather have related his teachings to the many things the Lemba have in common with Old Testament customs, without discrediting their other

beliefs. At any rate, in my view he made the same mistakes some of the Christian missionaries did many years ago.

The influence of other religions on the religious experience of early Israel

The religion of the Canaanites

The Canaanite city states were eventually at some stage (probably only by Davidic times) politically subjugated by the Israelite clans, but ideologically the Canaanite influence was felt by the Israelites for many centuries after. To illustrate this, the author of the Book of Judges is convinced of the power of the religion of the Canaanites over and above their military strength, leading to far-reaching consequences among the Israelite clans:

[t]hey forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them ... (Jdg 2:13-15 [NIV]).

Canaanite religion was polytheistically structured and comprised more than thirty goddesses and gods respectively occupying the supreme position. While Yahweh was viewed as Israel's national God in times of crisis, others referred to him as a member of the Canaanite pantheon. Yahweh's aid was called upon in times of war (most especially by the Exodus group; Jdg 5). However, the Israelite farmer, who most probably did not form part of the foreign group, relied on Baal for sustenance. Cultic practices, aimed at propitiating Baal, as well as local agricultural techniques, were widely maintained in the manner exercised by adjacent Canaanite neighbours. It was common practice in those days to act in such a way as to keep the gods content, a precondition for survival in the specific area. Monotheism, as preached by the prophets, was most probably a foreign concept during the era of the Judges. The Israelites in course of time identified with Canaanite agriculture, to which evidently they gradually added aspects of Yahwism. It would appear as if Baal was indeed worshipped and in time influences from this cult began to infiltrate Yahwism – some attributes peculiar to Baal were transferred onto Yahweh. This trend may have commenced as early as the days of the Judges.

One may gain the impression that the Israelites had renounced Yahweh totally and were consequently adhering to the gods of the land of Canaan. This however was evidently not the case. Despite Old Testament traditions which tell of the Israelites worshipping at Canaanite shrines, following Canaanite rituals and holding Canaanite gods in awe, they in fact maintained their faith in Yahweh, their national God, who had delivered them in times of crises and war and would continue to do so in future.

As time went by, the Israelites probably became so familiarised with the Baal cult that both Yahweh and Baal were associated with phenomena in nature (Jdg 5:4-5). Yahweh, however, was never connected with the god of fertility, who, it was believed, analogous to the cycle of nature, died and consequently rose from the dead. The Song of Debora (Jdg 5) provides a further possible indication of 'syncretism'. The song refers to a certain Samgar, son of Anat, the goddess who presumably had her shrine at Bet-Anat (Jdg 1:33; 3:31). Kapelrud (1969:27-28) emphasises that in the texts of Ras Shamra, Anat, either sister or spouse of Baal, is seen to be goddess of war, love and fertility. Mazabow (1973:133) suspects that such 'syncretism' (as he calls it) was caused by a decline in standards in respect of the Mosaic faith. For this reason the people of Yahweh were continuously admonished by the judges to cease following the Baals and Astartes (Jdg 2:13; 10:6; 3:7). Most probably (at ground-level) no pure Mosaic faith existed in early Israel, nor can one definitely speak of Yahwistic monotheism being practised at that time. These practices most likely merely constituted a part of the Baal and Astarte cult.

Such religious intertwining is strikingly evidenced by the bull figurine discovered on the Israelite cult sites in the vicinity of Dothan. A Mazar (1983:38) expands on this find, stating that the bull figurine on the one hand symbolised a deity (Yahweh) itself and on the other was characteristic of the god of storms (Baal). Both these aspects have an important bearing on the cult of the golden calf, though the precise meaning of the bull figurine remains unclear. The open question persists of who exactly was worshipped by this symbol. Judges 6:25, furthermore, illustrates this blend of religious elements and hints at the possibility (as already explained above) that a certain syncretising pluralism was a common phenomenon in those times.

Despite this, the Bible creates the impression of a tremendous contrast between Yahwistic monotheism and Canaanite polytheism, emphasised vigorously by the firm exhortations of the Judges that the Israelites should not associate themselves with exotic gods. Still, in reality the two currents happened to be very much interrelated and thus could not be kept apart at the best of times. Clearly, monotheism in all likelihood did not manifest itself before Elijah (ninth century) and Hosea (eighth century).

Egyptian monotheism and other religions

Possibly the Israelite clan was introduced to monotheism during its sojourn in Egypt. For if it holds true that Moses was indeed schooled in the house of the pharaoh, it follows that he must have been informed of the religious reforms introduced by Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) who pioneered the thought of monotheism. Influences from other religions such as those of the Moabites and Ammonites may perhaps be deduced from certain practices such as child-sacrifices (Jdg 11).

Evaluation and comparison

There are many striking concurrences in the life-worlds of the Lemba and of early Israel. Nevertheless, there are also significant differences. Substantial differences occur in a comparison of those traditions in a society that have been written down by its leaders, with those of the understanding and experience of people, at grass roots level, of the traditions in question. Regarding the Lemba, one should note the differences between what the leader of the LCA observes and notes in his book (Mathivha 1992) and that experienced by the people at the grass roots level. Obviously, it is not that one record is correct and the other wrong. I would think that both contain something of the truth. Each person or group experiences God in a different way, but often that which is eventually written down, becomes normative and permanent.

For example, the connection Mathivha sees between the Lemba's and the Israelite clans' conception of God and the role which the ancestors play, is noteworthy. For Mathivha there is no difference. Mathivha argues that the ancestors (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) only acted as mediators between God and the Israelites and they were not worshipped themselves (exactly as in the Lemba communities). However, when one takes note of Van der Toorn's research, then it appears as if Mathivha possibly underestimated the role of the cult of the ancestors in early Israel. The ancestors were most probably seen (unofficially) as gods; they were worshipped and were not only mediators, as Mathivha surmises. The particulars of this cult against which the prophets polemicised, were probably elided by later editors. Among the Lemba communities themselves, there is often reference to the ancestors as 'gods' and they are worshipped as such.

Some would say it is unacceptable to speak of *Modimo* and God as if they are one and the same God. We find, however, a similar kind of situation in the names given to God in the Old Testament. Some of those were the names of the Canaanite gods El and Baal, and there are even references to a possible consort for Yahweh from much later artefacts (*Kuntillet Ajrud*, in the eighth century). The mixing of names for God thus occurs amongst both the communities: El with Yahweh and for example, Modimo or Mwari with Jehovah. As with Baal and Yahweh in early Israel, the characteristics of Mwari were eventually transposed onto the God of the Bible and vice versa. That most Lemba belong to Christian churches may have had the effect that the concept of Jesus Christ may have eventually forced out other ideas about God or a godhead.

On the one hand it is easier to determine when and which names were used for God in early Israel and whether it is the same God spoken of, since the stories of the Israelite clans were partly written down. However, this still remains problematic. On the other hand, the fact that these stories were written down so many years after the events resulted in the loss of many records of *experiences* and it might also have happened that the author imbued a story with his/her own bias. This is inevitably also true of the

Lemba's ancient stories and experiences, when these were written down. The advantage in the latter is that one can at least clarify some uncertainties, or verify certain data, although they can obviously also only provide their own interpretation of what they experienced or understood.

Currently, many theologians in Africa (and elsewhere) are convinced that the Africans had already worshipped the living God long before they came into contact with the gospel (cf Adamo 1998; Mafico 1979). The beliefs of the Lemba are even more remarkable, since they consider themselves as 'children of Abraham' and they worshipped the *God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* long before they heard about that same God from the Bible.

When one reads the Old Testament, there are clearly specific commandments as to how God wants human beings to know him and worship him. The prophets and judges heavily polemicised against the mixing of the cults and abandoned any form of idolatry. Over against this, the tolerance of both groups (the Lemba and early Israelites) to 'other gods' in the land is very striking. Intolerance and exclusivity only developed much later among the prophets of Yahwism. However, intolerance toward other persons or 'heathen' is noteworthy amongst both groups.

It is also clear that not all Lemba connect circumcision to the Covenant with God. It is mainly the leaders in the communities, such as the high priest at Mberengwa and Mathivha, who emphasise this link. It may simply be that tradition had not yet reached all the Lemba clans and thus was not yet part of the life-world of everybody. The same can also be said of the Israelites, namely that making the covenant probably was not necessarily part of the conceptual world of all of the clans and thus of their memories and experience.

That various traditions indicate that as traders, the Lemba blazed the trail in Southern Africa for other groups such as the Vhasendji contradicts, to some extent, their narratives about being guided by Mwari by means of the star and the *ngoma lungundu*. Or did their competence as traders provide them with an advantage and the sensitivity to be led in the right direction?

It is by nature virtually impossible for a religion to develop or function independently of or isolated from other religious convictions and customs. The phenomenon of cross-fertilisation of religious thought and custom is thus very real and significant. This is true of the 'syncretism' found in the case of early Israel, which can be compared to a similar kind of 'syncretism' observed amongst the Lemba today. Lemba religion may be described as an amalgam of their specific brand of 'Judaism', Christianity, African traditional religions and Islam, whereas early Israel fused with Canaanite, Egyptian and other faiths such as those of the Ammonites and Moabites.

Table 5 below (see ADDENDUM III) compares the possible concurrences and differences of the experiential dimension and the religious viewpoints and customs between

the two communities. The numerous similarities, as well as the meaningful differences which are pointed out by the comparisons, may be employed for a better understanding of the reception of the Old Testament in an African context. As an example of this, one may refer to the 'cult of the ancestry'. Many questions about the role of the ancestors, the belief in the common ancestry and the importance of their existence elucidate certain parts of the Old Testament.

NOTES

1. Reference to God in this book is not intended to be a view of God influenced by any particular persuasion or dogma, but refers to the widest possible understanding of the idea of God.
2. Cf Van Warmelo 1940:11-15; Jaques 1931:248; Junod 1927:302; 1938:59,124-141.
3. Head of the Muslim centre at Chinyika (Gutu district, Zimbabwe).
4. Some consider these as two different names for the same mountain.
5. According to De Beer, among Black peoples, slaughtering is always related to the ancestral spirits (1998; cf Eiselen & Schapera [1937]1946:254).
6. The reference to ancestors was inferred from the conversation, but he said 'god'.
7. Politics and religion are part of their culture.
8. Most interviewees in Zimbabwe belonged to the Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church or Lutheran Church (D:N:1).

CHAPTER SIX

Myth among the Lemba and in early Israel

The human experiential dimension is often conveyed by means of myths. Myths, stories or images symbolise the invisible world. In fact, the origin of the word 'myth' (*Gk muthos*) means 'story'. Deist (1984:110) defines myth as 'a story dealing with primeval, eschatological or cosmic time and conveying a universal message or responding to questions that cannot be answered within the category of real time.' Many scholars agree that the mythical does not necessarily imply that which is fictitious (Smart 1989:15,16; cf Georges 1968:27,137; Jason 1977:11,33; Finnegan 1976:327; Jobling 1987:17). On the contrary, Bascon (1965:4) for example provides a useful basis to define what is meant by 'myth':

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are ... animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or underworld

The term 'myth' in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral and has no bearing on the veracity or falsity of a story enshrined in the myth itself. The mythical dimension is concerned with reporting what is believed by a specific group or person. Thus without prejudice, one can refer to stories about God and gods (heavenly beings) and stories relating to historical events of religious significance in a tradition as 'myths' or the 'mythological'.

Most Lemba and ancient Israelite myths and traditions are transmitted through songs, sermons, prayers, conversations, recitations, symbols, proverbs, sayings, written documents and numerous other media. The Lemba narratives and those of early Israel that are told or acted out on different occasions mainly reflect their *origin* and *identity* (or cultural-religious practices) as transmitted to them by their ancestors. At this stage

some of these myths with an Old Testament resonance will be briefly discussed. With regard to the Lemba, this study focuses mainly on the oral traditions gained from field research.

Myth among the Lemba

Creation mythology

According to my knowledge of the Lemba, the earliest creation narrative was recorded by Wangemann (1868:437). He describes it as follows:

Sie lehren, Gott ist da, er hat den Menschen gemacht; man hört oft Gewehre oben und Trommeln in der Erde, dabei ist es Gott. Er hat erst den Mann erschaffen, dann das Weib, im Anfange, dann hat er gesagt, sie sollen sich mehren; von Jobzoane sind die Menschen im Anfang gemacht. Zuerst hat er das Haupt und die Arme gemacht aus demselben Stoff wie die Steine.

(They teach that God is there. He made people; people often heard guns and drums in the earth, this was from God. At the beginning He first created the man and then the woman, then He said that they should multiply; people were made from 'Jobzoane' [sic] at the beginning. First He made the head and the arms, from the same material as the stones [my translation]).

When one asks the Lemba where they come from and who made them, they usually answer that they came from a land on the other side of the sea and that Mwari, 'the God of Abraham, the heavenly God' made them. No other stories about creation have been encountered during my field work. Their experience of God in this story is closely connected to their narrations about the *ngoma lungundu*, but also very much with the narratives of early Israel. As far as I can judge there is no other group in Southern Africa who have a tradition of origin so closely related to that in Genesis 2.¹ Another coincidence? In view of all the foregoing, maybe not.

From the 'Promised Land' through the desert, by sea to Africa

Nothing precise is known about the origin of the Lemba, but elderly Lemba informants still recall the story told by their grandparents:

We have come from a very remote place [Sena], on the other side of the Phusela [but they did not know where Phusela was]. We were on a big boat [some say on the back of a tree]. A terrible storm nearly destroyed us all. The boat was broken into two pieces. One half of us reached the shores of this country; the others were taken away with the second half of the boat, and we do not know where they are now... [my insertions; D:G:6; cf Junod 1908:277].

Mathivha explains that before 586 BCE when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and many Jews were captured (and even earlier), some of the Basena escaped and migrated to the open spaces in Yemen.² There they met Phoenician merchants who introduced them to trade with the Orient and Africa. In the meantime they established themselves at Sena and 'Phusela' in the Yemen Peninsula. 'Judaism' was practised to the full in the city of Sena, where they stayed for a long time, trading by means of boats with the East coast of Africa.

Whether the Lemba originally crossed the sea from Yemen, is not certain and irrelevant for this chapter, but oral traditions throughout the different Lemba communities concur on at least two points: They trace their immediate origins to Sena (at the Zambezi; see *Map II*) and their remote beginnings to Phusela and a city called Sena on the other side of the Phusela. However, it is more notable that it begins in some land beyond Sena (D:O:6).

And as mentioned above, the story of the late Wilfred Phophi concerning the origin of the Lemba differs from that told by Mathivha. 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' (in Parfitt 1992:48).

Closely related to the story that the Lemba came from Israel are the different terms which the Lemba use to describe themselves, as well as terms used by other people: Israelites,³ Jews⁴ or 'Black Jews' (see above; D:I[1]:10; D:M:8), 'children of Abraham' (D:L:8; D:K:5) or 'the Good Men'; and they refer to their sacred mountain in the Mberengwa district as 'the mountain of the Good Men'.

Some of the respondents even used the designations, 'chosen people', 'elite' group and 'holy people'. They averred that they are treated by the Venda as a 'sort of upper class, almost like gods' and that they were previously 'light-skinned – white men really'.

Some said that their parents had told them that they are Jews. Others 'admitted' that they had heard about this 'Jewishness' for the first time at the LCA Conferences held at Sweet Waters (Venda). Other respondents, for example those at Mamone in Sekhukhuneland, who never attended the conferences, confirmed that they knew nothing about being Jewish, but that they had come from Egypt.

Mpaketsane explains that

now that Professor Mathivha has revealed or maybe told [the Lemba] that they are Jews, some start to remember Yes, they have been before, but it is just because of the cultural diffusion they have just forgotten a little bit. But really we are the black Jews I believe I am from there [Judah]. I am the son ... the grand, grand, grandson of Abraham' (D:K:1,5; [my insertion]).

Ali Mutazu told me that '[Mathivha] is a Christian, he follows the Lutheran church. So he is a Muremba [Lemba] that professor, but he is trying to convince the Vãremba [at Mberengwa] that they are Jews not Muslim' (D:O:11; [my insertions]; cf **Photo 22**).



Photo 22 *Muslim centre in Chinyika, Zimbabwe*

In connection with the notion that they were not originally from Africa, there is the other story which maintains that the Lemba once spoke a language of their own. The priest as well as Napi, a traditional healer in Sekhukhuneland, informed us that they 'have got secret words which must not be revealed to people ... it is a different language which is the language left to us which we inherited from our forefathers when doing circumcision' (D:A:10). Today there are still certain grammatical forms and words that are not to be found among other Black people. Many of these words can be traced back to Arabic and Hebrew words. Mutazu (Chinyika, Zimbabwe) assumes that the Lemba are Arabs, in particular because 'the names of their forefathers [which] are completely from the Arabian language, such as Yukari and Seremani' (D:O:6; [my insertion]). Some specialists maintain that the 'secret words' that have remained relate to Karanga, which served as a kind of *lingua franca* for the groups of people who were associated with Great Zimbabwe at the time of Monomotapa (cf De Vaal 1958:53; Gayre of Gayre 1967:10,12; see *Map II*).

Possibly the Lemba came from Yemen to the East coast of Africa with Arabic traders, or they are a mixture of Arabic traders and the local populations. From this point of view, the Lemba probably traded between the East coast and the interior.

Guided by a star and ngoma lungundu

The Lemba believe that they were guided by a star (sent by God/Mwari) from Sena (on the Zambezi) to what we call Zimbabwe today (and southwards to other places). The star served as a symbol of Mwari's presence.

Together with the star, it appears that on their journey to the South, the *ngoma lungundu* ('the drum that thunders') played a more or less similar role to that played by the Ark of the Covenant for the ancient Israelite tribes (although the Lemba themselves never make this connection). The *ngoma lungundu* was considered holy and was not to be touched improperly or placed on the bare ground. Inside this drum were sacred objects which belonged to the Vhasendji (probably the Venda). Therefore, because of their magical skills especially during warfare, the Lemba had to carry the drum (for the Vhasendji) and it was guarded at night by a mythical pillar of flame (Bloomhill 1960:165). If this magic drum was lost, calamity would befall them.

According to Ravele (1958:76-77), the name Lemba is derived from *lembe*, which means 'a secret iron affixed to the beads worn by Vendas when doing their ceremonies.' The Lemba were also obliged to carry a wooden basket full of *Malembe* for the Venda. When the enemy heard the sound of this magical drum, it was said to have a special effect on them – they were claimed not to be able to move, since it rendered them utterly powerless. The following poem by Mudau (in Bloomhill 1960:167) is founded on this legend of the *ngoma lungundu*:⁵

NGOMA LUNGUNDU

*Mount Mbelengwa⁶ of the Good People
Whither hail we – MuLemba, children of Mambo! –
Of Ngoma Lungundu the drum of the Lord!
Strength of our nation we bore from the Northland
Chastened by fire and harried by men!
Guarded by cloud and at night by a pillar of flame.
Wind spurned by warrior, machila and caravan
Vainly wrought gyves for our feet
At the throb of Thy beat
– Of Thy beat.
Mount Mbelengwa of the Good People
Whither hail we!*

*Mountain of beauty laved by the waters of life!
Murm'ring Dzanu and Nahwe the daughter of laughter
Sparkling Mutentenwa caressing the mountain's green grass-beard,
And Nwanzhi the singing stream.*

*Mount Mbelengwa of the Good People
Whither hail we!
Mid clouds of thy flame and thy thunder
Mwali, High Priest of Mambo,
Was promised the fertile land.
But Thy wrath it would seek us and slay us
If we lay with the stranger's daughter,
If we ate of the unclean flesh.*

*And so through the wastes and the grasslands,
Through vlei and o'er kopje,
River and rainburst and drought
Have we borne Thee, Ngoma Lungundu!
Have we winged Thee o'er earth and clothed Thee in myst'ry,
That the strength of Thy children live on,
Timeless and ageless and deathless.
And at night in our forefathers' name
We bow 'fore Thy pillar of flame [my endnote].*

According to Bloomhill (1960:165) it can be deduced from this poem that the origin of the legend was traced back to the Chasenzi of Matongoni (from where the Lemba were driven), while the Lemba were carrying the drum to the South. This all happened before any missionary influence was experienced by any of their people. There is also specific mention of some of their dietary and marital laws. Bloomhill is further convinced that 'no other legend is so imbued with the mystic enthrallment of African folklore as that of *Ngoma Lungundu*' (1960:165).

Mathivha (1992:10) relates that in Africa one group (of Lemba) went westwards and settled in Ethiopia, while the other group, led by Hamisi, migrated southwards along the coast until they settled on mountains, to which the star guided them, at a place called Sena II and thereafter at Sena III in the valley (cf D:P:5; only Sena I in Yemen and Sena III in the Zambezi can be indicated geographically). After Sena III they settled at a place called Bhela (in the present Mozambique; cf D:M:2). In Bhela many died from disease. According to Mathivha, the Bakari, the ruling house at that time, is still a strong dynasty in Mozambique. From Bhela they spread to areas such as Gorongozi (or Gorongoza).

Mathivha further tells that between 400-300 BCE, the Basena left Bhela and migrated westwards under the leadership of Seremane, until they settled at Chilamba (Chiramba; 400-300 BCE; cf Chiremba above) in the Wedza district (the mid-eastern part of Zimbabwe). Here they mined *iron*, *copper* and other minerals and manufactured iron articles, *clothes* and *pottery* for trading (cf D:H[1]:4; D:J[1]:6). The community under Seremane soon became a large community and Hamisi decided to proceed in a southwesterly direction until he reached Gokomere, to the South of Zimbabwe.

Marimazhira (D:G:6) was told by his grandparents that in Gokomere they settled for a short period of time and then moved on under Tovakare-Muzimbabwe to mountains similar to those at Sena II. Tradition holds that they were again guided to this particular place by a star⁷ (D:G:6, the Hadzhi were specifically led by the star). Here on top of a hill, they built a fort and a place of worship (300-200 BCE). The Tovakare lineage were especially famous for their *stone masonry*. Marimazhira (D:G:9) and many others have witnessed how the Varembe referred and still refer to the Tovakare as 'those who built Great Zimbabwe'.

Mathivha relates that *circumcision* was practised at Great Zimbabwe and that the pottery industry developed to an advanced level. The Tovakare Dynasty was succeeded by Zungunde, Ngavi or Ngavi-Zungunde. Zungunde ruled until their God Mwali or Mwari⁸ (the heavenly God) brought illness to the community because of unbecoming practices. This caused the dispersion of the Basena who left Zimbabwe and divided into two groups. Mathivha adds that the one group went southwards under Zungunde and settled in Mapakomhere (200 BCE), where they can still be found under Chief Machipisa Tadzembwa. The other group (under Mhani), went westward under the guidance of a star which appeared every evening and showed the way. They followed the star until it stopped over the little hills of Zvishavane, near Masvingo. Here they discovered asbestos and once again practised their skills of iron manufacturing.

During the long rule of King Shabi from the Mhani tribe, the star continually reappeared to remind them that Mwari was not satisfied with Zvishavane (Mathivha 1992:4). So one night they followed the star in a southerly direction, until it reached the mountain where it stopped. The leader of this group, Mbelengwa of the Hadzhi tribe, established his village on the mountain and named it Mberengwa (200-100 BCE). From here the traders travelled all over the area seeking trade. It was also here that the Basena changed their name to Balemba, that is, the community of Mbelengwa.

At almost all the feasts and ceremonial occasions of the Lemba, stories of their origin and history are presented and transmitted to the following generation by means of songs, recitations and chants, among others. The Lemba (and other people) express their desire to find out who they are by telling a story about how they came to be what they are and where they came from. *Myth* is thus a source that provides a sense of identity. Moreover, myth is given additional impact when one's identity and destiny is expressed in terms of the unseen world – such as being guided by a star, and the *ngoma*

lungundu. It is noteworthy that the main stories of the Lemba do not necessarily include animals or cultural heroes as characters, as indicated by Bascon (1965:4), but that they are considered as truthful accounts of what happened in their past.

Myth in early Israel

Ancient Israel remembered the patriarchs, the Exodus, their wandering through the wilderness, the 'conquest' of Canaan, as well as numerous other myths with historical and religious significance. Within these narratives the Covenant with God played a major role. Whether early Israel (before the monarchy) already had a creation myth is not certain, but most probably at that stage, Genesis 2 was in its oral phase (possibly that of the Yahwist).

Possibly, oral traditions increasingly obtained a more prominent place among the clans of Israel. These could have been important in establishing their *identity* and the *uniqueness* of their God in the midst of the conglomeration of other nations which also laid claim to the same land. Their traditions can therefore be described as a sacred factor of coherence with a political undertone.

The need to remember and recite the stories on special occasions implies the possibility that the stories could have been forgotten. Harris says, 'By linking herself to the past Israel becomes part of the future because past and future are in God's purpose' (1992:54). The most obvious place where the clans would have had the opportunity to exchange their traditions was at the sanctuaries (as already mentioned). There the clans presumably participated in the Canaanite agricultural feasts. Possibly during the worship of Baal as the god of fertility, they felt the need and desire also to proclaim and laud the acts of Yahweh's redemption. Thus, these acts also gained cultic significance, since the clans linked one cultic activity or another and one confession of faith or another to them.

Creation mythology

Anthropologists and other scholars have discovered that every culture embraces creation myths – stories of how life began. Whether early Israel already knew the creation myth narrated in Genesis 2 is not certain. Nevertheless, this version, as a narrative, presents a less majestic and transcendent God than the version in Genesis 1.

Genesis 2 employs the motif that God created by *making* people (Van Dyk 1987:7). He behaved like a farmer in the Garden of Eden and moulded his creation of human beings as a sculptor would have done. A single male was created, followed by the plants and then by the woman (cf Gen 1). In Genesis 2 and 3 no real attempt is made to give any sort of chronological sequence of events in the creation story.

The uncreated world is presented as a desert, where neither rain nor dew fell and where no fountain sprang. Moreover, Genesis 2 portrays a God who fears the potential power of the humans to become too much like God himself. However, He could still banish his creation from the Garden when He realised their intention to usurp his power, but in this Israelite narrative, God is the sole Creator who does not assume power in a tale of war.

Approximately five hundred years later, the Israelites were confronted with the different creation myths in Babylonia and were forced to decide where their God fitted into the pantheon of gods. Genesis 1 boldly affirms their belief: God is the all-powerful sole Creator! The God of Israel is unique. He only needed to use the words of his mouth in order to create. No battle was necessary (in contradiction to other gods). Genesis 1 reflects Israel's (not early Israel's) uncertainty at a time when it had been conquered by the adherents of the god Marduk.⁹

From Africa, through the sea and the desert to the 'Promised Land'

A number of stories which may have served as the historical basis for the clans of Israel were: their deliverance from Egypt (Africa) and concomitant slavery, when they built the cities of Pithom and Raamses, the journey through the Red Sea and the desert, the encounter with God at Sinai and the entry into the 'Promised Land' by certain clans of Israel from the southern Trans-Jordanian region. These stories and others were probably the oldest traditions already in circulation in early Israel and they were interwoven with Israelite identity (Smart 1995:81).

Noth ([1958]1983:111) considers Yahweh's act of delivering the 'Israelites' from Egypt as the oldest and the most important element of the Israelite faith (Nm 23:22-24:8; 2 Sm 7:23; 1 Sm 4:8; Jdg 6:13). It functioned already in pre-monarchical times. The story delivered by the 'Exodus group' later became part of the creed of the whole of Israel. Noth also suspects that the earliest deposit of these events is contained in a section of the so-called Song of Moses found in Exodus 15:21b: 'The horse and his rider he [Yahweh] has hurled into the sea' (NASB, [my brackets]). The oral tradition (of early Israel) could more or less have entailed that 'a group of Hebrews fled from Egypt, that Yahweh hurled horse and rider (Egyptians) into the sea and that Moses was involved in the process.' In due course, possibly during the time of the Judges, the significance of this song had to be explained to their posterity. Attempts could have been made to explain or expound finer details of the events and mythical elements such as the ten plagues, or how the sea split into two, while numerous others could have been added.

One of the elements contained in the story about the exodus from Egypt is the Passover ritual, according to which the Exodus people had to eat unleavened bread (Ex 12). In view of this, it is not unusual that the clans of Israel would without any ado link the tradition of the deliverance from Egypt to the Canaanite agricultural feast, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Another Canaanite agricultural feast where the Exodus people prob-

ably would have relived and narrated the story of the exodus is the Feast of the Ingathering, which probably was already known as the Feast of Booths or of Tabernacles in early Israel. Other traditions connected to the exodus are Yahweh's appearance to Moses at the burning bush at Mount Horeb (Sinai), where He called him to deliver His people from Egypt and later at the same mountain, when Yahweh made known the Ten Commandments to the people with thunder and the rumbling of the earth (cf Ex 20).

All these stories and connections to the Canaanite feasts were attempts to convey past events to future generations, thereby keeping Yahweh's acts of salvation alive in their memory.

Guided by a pillar of cloud and fire and the Ark of the Covenant

Linked to the above-mentioned point, the Exodus group also had the reminder of the mobile sanctuary, namely the Ark of the Covenant, which dated from their desert wanderings. In addition to the Ark, which symbolised the presence of Yahweh and which, according to tradition, contained the Decalogue, the clans of Israel were also reminded of God's presence. By means of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, a further symbol of God's presence was presented to them. When the cloud or fiery pillar moved, they moved. When it stood still, they remained where they were.

It is very difficult to determine how old the stories concerning the existence and appearance of the Ark are, or to date associated traditions. Nevertheless, different traditions exist concerning the memory of a cultic object that apparently was of great significance for the clans of Israel during their sojourn in the desert.

Evaluation and comparison

The similarities between the myths of the various groups (the Lemba and early Israel) are remarkable. In my opinion, the Lemba's creation story which concurs very closely with that of early Israel, is unique in comparison with such myths of the indigenous groups in Southern Africa. The age or the historical accuracy of the stories is not of importance here. What is important is what they believed and what formed part of their world-view. Why many elements of the stories were only conveyed much later is also uncertain. Nevertheless, these stories have both historical and religious significance.

Both groups express their experience by means of these stories. Since I am neutral (for the purpose of this study) regarding the authenticity or falsity of the stories enshrined in these myths, I cannot express a judgement regarding their origins and identity. One purpose of this book is to give a more or less accurate rendering of what these groups believe their history to be. Their myths of the remote past 'are taught to be believed' and 'are cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt and disbelief' (Bascon 1965:4).

Table 6 below (see ADDENDUM III) reflects the most salient similarities and differences of the mythical dimension of the religious practices and viewpoints of the Lemba and of early Israel. It may, for example, be felicitous for scholars to take cognisance of the various creation narratives in Africa, because these situate the biblical narrative within a broader context.

NOTES

1. According to a creation myth of the Zulu people, human beings emerged from the *Uhlanga* (the source of all life), without anything. The Black men came out naked, leaving most things behind, because they came out first. They only emerged with some cattle, corn, spears and picks out of digging the earth. Later the White men came out with ox-drawn wagons bearing abundant goods, which were able to traverse great distances (Callaway 1868-70:79-94).

The Nguni and Tsonga believed that 'the creator "broke off the nations" from a bed of reeds and the South Sotho, perhaps influenced by the Nguni, taught that all true Sotho came from a reed bed at Ntsuanatsatsi in the Free State' (Hammond-Tooke 1993:150). Hammond-Tooke also records that according to the Xhosa, all people, stock and all forms of animal life came out of a cavern 'in a land in which the sun rises' and the Tswana, Tsonga and Lovedu referred to certain places where the god's footprints could still be seen on the rocks.
2. The linking of a date to these migration traditions is obviously a very recent addition by leaders, such as Mathivha.
3. Mposi comments, 'when we read the Bible and see that we're like the Jews and the Israelite people who didn't like to mix with other people - who regard other people unclean [then we know] that's what we are....' (D:M:10; [my insertion]).
4. Again in other sources, Lestrade ([1937]1946) and other authors indicate a strong Arabic influence.
5. In 1928 Mr E Mudau won First Prize for this Venda essay in a competition set by the International Institute of African Languages (Bloomhill 1960:167).
6. Cf Mberengwa above. The 'r' and 'l' is often interchangeable in African languages (Bloomhill 1960:165).
7. According to De Beer (1997) this tradition is probably intertwined with the story of the birth of Christ. He observed that 'syncretism' is apparently a general phenomenon amongst Bantu speaking and other groups.
8. The supreme deity of the Shona, who was also later taken over by the Mathebele. More than one interviewee indicated that Mwari is or was also the supreme deity of the Lemba.
9. Marduk was the primary deity of Babylon. The Babylonian epic of creation commemorates the god's victory over forces of evil and honours him as 'king of the gods' (cf ANET:1-9).