

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rites among the Lemba and in early Israel

The dimension of ritual is central to religion and vital for the understanding of world-views. The experiential is not only channelled and expressed by myth, but also through ritual. Every tradition has its rituals and practices such as regular worship, sacrifices, sacraments (rituals which are believed to convey God's grace) or other patterns of behaviour, which fulfil a function in developing spiritual awareness or ethical insight. Niditch (1997:99) affirms this viewpoint: 'The ritual dimension serves to restore the image of order when it falls into disarray or becomes clouded.' In trying to analyse and understand the ritual process in both the Lemba community and early Israel, I shall investigate two examples, namely *rituals of sacrifice* and so-called *rites of passage* or transition. There is usually a story behind a ritual and therefore the stories (narratives or myths), of religion are often integrated into the ritual dimension.

The *rites of passage* are ceremonies or rituals which accompany vital transitions during life, such as the transition from puberty to adulthood, from outside to inside the tribe (e.g. rituals associated with marriage), the Covenant with God and movement from one cycle in nature to another (for example, new moon or new year).

Rites among the Lemba

Rituals of passage

Male circumcision (ngoma)

The Lemba practice of male circumcision is called *ngoma*. *Ngoma* in some African languages generally means drum (e.g. *ngoma lungundu*) or dance, but not circumcision. Therefore, Kritzinger (1997) suggests that it seems as though the associations between the central elements of the Lemba identity are so strong that this word is also used for circumcision.

One of the most informative interviewees, during the field research, who answered most of my questions about their history and more specifically, questions concerning circumcision, was William Ratsoma (alias Napi), a traditional healer in India, a Lemba

community in Sekhukhuneland (Mpumalanga; see *Map II*). Apart from being a traditional healer (from Mogabane), he is fully involved in the circumcision and initiation of males and females in Sekhukhuneland.

Napi was most willing to show us the route up the Leolo Mountain and to describe how the boys pass through the initiation ceremony. He described the atmosphere and the procedures. He sang every song or chant, usually sung by the elders of the tribe and recited at the important localities. These kinds of songs and recitations are also part of the lessons, when the Lemba, for example, conduct *kurubha* (circumcision teaching) in Zimbabwe at the Mberengwa Mountain. In other words, the transmission of information during this ceremony takes place by means of songs, chants, recitations and so on. The information conveyed has a secret meaning and is usually not meant to be known by the uncircumcised, since they are 'heathen' or 'unclean' and are not privileged to learn about it. What has become known over time is that during the ceremony the 'novices' are informed about all facets of Lemba culture and history, especially about the secret ways and formulae to perform certain procedures and rituals.

In the section below there are two songs and chants used during the circumcision ceremonies in the Mberengwa District, in Zimbabwe (translated into Shona and into English). Special permission had to be obtained from Zivengwa Mposi, the brother of Chief Mposi in Mberengwa (D:M:6), to publish these. These songs are presented with an English translation where possible:

<i>Oh! he he he he-e</i>	<i>Oh! (He he he he-e) Humming</i>
<i>Oh! hiye hiye hiye</i>	<i>Oh! (Hoye hiye hiye) Humming</i>
<i>Oh! hera Maria ho here here re</i>	<i>Oh! Holy Maria (ho here he - he) Humming</i>
<i>Here hiye-e</i>	<i>(Here hiye-e) Humming</i>
<i>Oh! hera Maria ho here he-he</i>	<i>Oh! Holy Maria (ho here he he)</i>
<i>Oye hiye hiye</i>	<i>(Oye hiye hiye)</i>
<i>Oh nhamo inouya here he he he</i>	<i>Oh! poverty will come (here he he he)</i>
<i>Ewoye hiye ye a! Heya heya hee-hee</i>	<i>(Ewoye hiye ye a! Heya heya he-e he-e)</i>
<i>vaMaria wonde</i>	<i>Holy Maria definitely come</i>
<i>Oh hiye he dzvotsvo</i>	<i>(Oh hiye he) upheaval</i>

On the surface this song does not seem to have a special meaning, but this next song or chant tells much about the Varembe tribe (that is Lemba). According to Mposi, it reflects their traditional religion especially as it was practised by their ancestors, but the song is so secret that no other person or tribe knows it – others are not aware of its real meaning (D:M:6):

SAISA WAKAFA

Saisa wakafa akafira mubani raRengwe
Hiye hiye yiye here
Ho! Here hiye woye
Hiye hiye saisa iwe
Ho! Here ha! Hoye
Hoye Saisa wakafa ha e he e eha eha
Hongo kubani revengwe
Ha! e - ere here ha! Heya heya - heya
Huwe yi Saisa iwe
Ho! yere iye iye
Hiye yi saisa here
Hoiyere ha woye - e
Ho! Kubani rokwedu
Ha-a! Eha-eha e-eha e-eha chakafirapo
Hongodzi yaisa mposi
Ha! Eha here ha heya heya chakafira Maroza

Mposi explains that this song is not translatable, but reflects some of the problems they came across when they were in the jungle (during circumcision). It is about Saisa, who died on the plain of Rengwe (Mount Mberengwa), because the enemy had bewitched him. He died at Maroza (probably because his parents did not confess all their sins before their son went to be circumcised; see below). Both songs form part of their teaching during circumcision.

Other secret or special words used by the priest when performing the circumcision are 'El pharusia',¹ which they interpret as God, the wise one (D:P:4). The respondent does not know 'whether it is a prayer or ... an address, actually that wisdom to God, or whether it is the wisdom passed from God to the priest to circumcise.' Mposi contends that '(S)elemane shidja' are other Hebrew words of which he does not know the meaning anymore, but which are used during circumcision or animal slaughter (D:P:11). Parfitt (1992) indicates that *Selemane* could be a corrupted form of *Solomon*.

Whenever there are sufficient boys or girls who need to be circumcised or initiated and enough food and water, the elders gather at the chief's kraal and decide to hold such a ceremony. As far as the boys are concerned, on the agreed evening their fathers bring them to the chief's kraal and all the elders of the clan join them to lecture the boys on this important step in their lives. Later that same evening Napi and the elders take the boys to the nearest clinic at Jane Furse hospital (near Schoonoord) and after a thorough examination, the doctor will inject each candidate with local anaesthetic for the pain. Then they return to the chief's kraal.

At exactly two o'clock the next morning, they depart from the chief's kraal from the one side of the valley to the opposite side, where the circumcision takes place on the Leolo

Mountain. In an attempt to confuse the boys (lest they decide to run away), the elders lead the boys along a longer road through the valley into the mountain. Along the way the elders stand side by side to make sure that no one runs away. If a boy should succeed in running away after the circumcision, he would most definitely perish in the mountain. Walking up the mountain they sing a certain chant to indicate that 'there is some serious business going on'.

The boys gather at a certain spot behind the hills at the foot of the mountain and from there they are taken one by one up the slope to the 'chair' in front of the witch doctor. There the elders say to them: 'You want a chair at home – here is a real chair. If you want to become a man you must be able to sit on this chair' (V:1:SEK). This expression reflects some of the psychological reasons for the circumcision. It is seen as a ceremony where a boy enters both the community of God and the entire Lemba community (where he learns all about their practices). In other words this is an initiation into adulthood, but they first have to pass through hardships to become an adult. Only then are they prepared for life (Mathivha 1999b).²



Photo 23 *Mr William Ratsoma (alias Napi), traditional healer in India, Sekhukhuneland*

This famous chair is made of two stones – one to sit on and the other to support your back. When the boy sits in the chair two elders each take one of the boy's arms, while the witchdoctor opens his legs to give the boy 'a proper view' and that is when he

circumcises the boy with a sharp knife. Napi (the traditional healer, cf *Photo 23*) usually stands close by with his assegai and a spear as a dire warning to the boys, lest they succumb to the urge to scream or cry. Nevertheless, some of the boys do scream or cry, but the elders do not hold it against them, according to Napi. In the background the elders sing out loud and beat the drums to drown out the screams or cries.³ Each boy is given a can after being circumcised, so that the blood from the wound can be prevented from spilling on the ground. With an elder at each arm, the boys are guided to a specific place where they have to rest on their hands and knees to bleed. Afterwards, the witch-doctor comes to 'collect' the blood. In this way evildoers or people with bad intentions are prevented from getting hold of the boys' blood. This practice is most probably the influence of the African traditional religions. The wound is wrapped up for four or five days in leaves possessing some curative or healing properties.⁴ The patient is not allowed to remove the dressing or apply any other form of lotion. Wheelwright (1905:251-255) records that after this period the patients paint their entire bodies with white clay. Napi did not mention any painting activities, but said it takes about forty-five hours before the bleeding stops. In all this time, Napi and the witch doctor are on stand-by in case of an emergency. If anything goes amiss with one of the boys, they are immediately taken to hospital. Napi also showed us a kind of sacrificial altar or cairn on the mountain, where the boys learn other Lemba practices and ceremonies specifically associated with their ancestors. The graves of powerful ancestors, especially the chiefs, become the places of worship where meat and beer are offered to their spirits.

During the circumcision ceremony, Napi continued, the girls and the women do the cooking, called 'Chivonero' or 'Thivhonoelo'. A specific place is chosen where the men come to fetch the food (usually fish and porridge) to be used at the circumcision lodge. Leaves serve as plates for the food. According to Napi, the boys remain in the mountain for three months until their wounds have healed.

At the end of that period they go to another place where they stay for another week and then they return to the chief's kraal where he has prepared a meal for them and their fathers. Napi added: 'Now they are men and prepared for marriage.' Then Napi made an interesting remark. He said that after the meal they go home where their fathers 'cut their hair just a little bit around their heads' (V:1:SEK).

Napi further explained that we would find many people in the Lemba community who are not circumcised. No one can be forced, but if one does not report for circumcision, one owes the chief two head of cattle. The reason is that the Lemba don't want their people's blood to be shed at other people's places, because people with bad intentions could get hold of one's blood (during circumcision) and 'use it to bewitch you and then you will get many diseases' (V:1:SEK).

It could be possible that somewhere in the past the Lemba received the practice of circumcision through Muslim influence. Nabarro (cited in Spurdle & Jenkins 1996:1131), however, maintains that the method associated with male circumcision used by the

Lemba differs markedly from that of Muslims. The incision is small and possibly similar to the mode of circumcision practised in biblical times, *before the introduction of more extensive circumcision during the Talmudic period.*⁵

Most of the respondents indicated that the circumcision ceremony is unique to the Lemba people, but some admit that 'nowadays you cannot say unique because if you talk about circumcision you find everybody is doing something [b]ut originally I think that is the Balemba people who did it' (D:G:2:7,8). Mpaketsane remarks that 'presently the circumcision is a little bit going down and down and down.... This is the cost of acculturation. Just because of the cultural deficient it is gradually being avoided ...' (D:K:14).

Napi could not tell us much about the general meaning behind the ceremony, but Father Marimazhira (in Zimbabwe) contends that circumcision

has something to do with our physical and spiritual cleanliness. And the cleanliness indicates discipline of mind, because if one is not prepared to go for circumcision the others will always know 'he has not been there, so what good can he be?' He has no discipline, he has not been taught, he does not know what he has to do. If you attend the circumcision you are easily accepted into the community and you have learned how to kosher-kill an animal (D:G:9,10).

Mathivha (1992:47) adds that

the curriculum [during circumcision] consists of the learning of the formulae and the observing of proper procedure and the love for the truth. Honesty is emphasized now and again so that the Lembas must love one another. They are taught to respect the elders and to listen to them i.e to every father and mother.

Thus it is a kind of initiation ceremony into the Lemba clan. The do's and don'ts (the curriculum during the ceremony) of this particular culture and covenant are stressed very strongly on this occasion. However, it is not clear what specific education they receive on their history and requirements for marriage.

To the Lemba circumcision is an important ritual to which many of their traditions are linked. The traditions relate that they are the group who have knowledge of how and why circumcision has to be practised. Those who do not practise this are the 'heathen' and they are 'unclean', while they themselves are the chosen people, who are incorporated into the Covenant of God. Certain perspectives of their world-view emerge here, namely that this practice establishes them as the elect and makes them unique and special.

It is said that any deaths occurring during the course of the initiation ceremony are kept secret. The bodies are quietly buried in the vicinity without any form of mourning and

the deceased is simply looked upon as having disappeared. Overall a profound secrecy is maintained by all who attended the lodges (Wheelwright 1905:255).

It appears as if the notion of original sin or collective guilt is inherent here. Unconfessed sin by the parents can actually cause the death of the child during the circumcision ceremony. The holiness of the Covenant, or incorporation into the clan, may also underline this belief. This emphasis on the confession of sin ostensibly occurs mainly among the communities in the South of Zimbabwe. This may also reflect some influence of Christianity on the Lemba culture.

A telling story behind the ritual is that many respondents remember that the *circumcision of male infants* usually took place on the *eighth day*. Phophi (Parfitt 1992:50) argues that

in the past the circumcision took place on the eighth day. And then, in remembrance of the eighth day, we circumcised in the eighth year. Then the influence of the other tribes' initiation rites became very great and we started doing it whenever there were enough boys to make up a group big enough for an initiation school (cf D:M:6; D:P:2).

Runesu (D:L:8) is convinced that 'it is only because of poverty [that we infrequently go into camp for the initiation ceremonies] but if we can just get people who might assist... we can do it so early as eight days' ([my insertion]).

In a study of Islam in Africa, Price contends that several observers particularly note the Semitic physical features of the Lemba (Mwenye) and the fact that they conduct the 'non-Bantu practice of *male circumcision of infants*' (1954:33):

The Mwenye profession of Islam depends on the observed food tabus, the circumcision of male infants denoted simply by mambo waana wathu – 'our custom with regard to children' ... They do not have the Qur'ān or any system of instruction in orally transmitted texts, they do not keep ritual observances of the day or the week, nor the fast of Ramadan. They in fact appear to be very thorough-going materialists at their present stage, lacking serious interest in either the beliefs of their fathers or the religions of the people they have come among.

Price (1954:33) notes that these Mwenye groups have neither significant Muslim practices nor interest in their beliefs nor in the beliefs of their fathers: a very peculiar phenomenon for an African people. Price further observes that the circumcision of the Mwenye was different from the general African practice, because they conduct the circumcision of male *infants*. This statement corroborates the oral tradition of the Lemba that they earlier conducted circumcision on the eighth day (that is, on babies). Other observers also noted (as Price does above) that the Lemba do not really fit in – they were amazed to find the circumcision of male infants among an African group. These

observations lead to the conclusion that these Lemba (or Mwenye) groups were confused, that they perhaps did not feel at home with either of the two religious groups (i.e. Muslim or Bantu) mentioned above.

Father Marimazhira at Zvishavane and other respondents explain that at the end of the circumcision school, the boys are given *new names* in addition to their first names. The new names all start with 'Ra' such as Rambevha, Rasivheshele and Razwimisani (D:G:2,3). The prefix 'Ra' indicates that this is now a man 'who can reproduce Lembas when he is married' (cf Mathivha 1992:48; Motshekga 1983).⁶ But this 'Ra' is also connected to a name of one of the ancestors. 'Ra' in fact actually means 'father' in Venda, therefore this prefix connects the person with his specific ancestor. Mathivha indicates that the girls are similarly given new names at the end of their initiation, after which they are called by new names. Those names, he explains, are not as characteristic as those of the boys. Refilwe Mpaketsane said that those names for the girls are simply the names of their grandmothers or aunts.

Many scholars and interviewees are convinced that *the Lemba introduced circumcision (ngoma) into Southern Africa* (cf Junod 1908:44, 283; Jaques 1931:247). They were even called the 'masters of *ngoma*' and it was thought that they 'hold a special position in the [circumcision] lodges' (Junod 1927:73). Phophi (cited in Parfitt 1992:50; cf D:L:7) is convinced that

the Lemba were once Moors But please do not think these Moors were Muslims. They were, of course Jews. And in any case long before the Portuguese came, we were doing circumcision at Great Zimbabwe. They found phallic stones there And guess what? They're circumcised.

Parfitt has no doubt about the similarities between the practices of the 'Moors' and the Lemba. In particular, he refers to their enthusiasm for lunar festivals and circumcision. In fact, one of the transmitted traditions of the Lemba holds that the Lemba were the builders of Great Zimbabwe. Phophi, therefore, finds a confirmation in the discovery of the circumcised phallic stones for their participation in the building of Great Zimbabwe and their influence there.

The initiation ritual for women

In a relatively recent newspaper article Rademeyer (Beeld 1996) maintains that female circumcision does not occur in South African communities.⁷ During my first visit I was amazed to learn that the Lemba community in Sekhukhuneland performs not only male circumcision but also female circumcision. According to my respondent, Napi (less than two hours' drive from Pretoria), female circumcision⁸ is in full practice (V:1:SEK; cf D:G:2:8).

Napi continued that this ceremony is performed on the opposite side of the Leolo Mountains across the valley (from where the male circumcision takes place), on the mountain just behind the chief's kraal (**cf Photo 24**). Napi explains that like the boys, the girls, together with their mothers and the older women in the community, gather at the chief's kraal and are taken to the clinic, but then they go home again. Early the next morning the girls and the older women ascend the mountain and there, at half past five, the girls 'take a bath' in a deep pool in the Mholotloane River. Napi did not show the same openness in explaining and demonstrating as he did with the boys' ceremony, but he nevertheless explained that 'to take a bath means that the witch doctor's wife circumcises the girls in the pool in the river' (cf D:I:5-7). This circumcision, Napi explained, entails an operation. Higher up the river he showed us a much deeper pool where the Christians baptise or immerse their people. As a matter of fact, most of the Lemba simultaneously declare Jesus Christ as their Saviour. They do not have any problem in adding the Christian beliefs and doctrines to their existing Lemba culture and beliefs. Napi was very proud to show us their holy river and the chief later explained why it is sacred to them in particular.



Photo 24 India Village from the White Mountain, with the Leolo Mountain in the background

Napi further informed us that after the circumcision at 19:00, the girls return to the courtyard, from where they return home for one week. After that they go back to the mountain where they stay in the vicinity of another branch of the river. During the day they sit half-immersed in the water in the shade of the trees, and at night they sleep in

a more sheltered place. Here they stay for one week and during that time the male witch doctor and the traditional doctor (Napi, in this instance) examines each one of them to see if everything is fine.

Parfitt (1992:177) was similarly told (in Zimbabwe) that a Lemba girl, at the onset of puberty, was traditionally expected to sit up to her neck in river water (depending on how much it rained that year), for two weeks, with a gourd on her head. She was also presented with a sharp conical wooden object decorated with a red tassel, upon which she had to impale herself in the river for a further three days. These immersions were considered exercises in humility.⁹ However, Parfitt's informants did not mention any operation.

Whether the female circumcision entails an operation, at first remained a question. I observed that Mathivha, who lives in Venda, as well as other scholars do not mention the circumcision of girls in terms of an operation, but indicate that they do attend an initiation ceremony called 'Vhusha' or 'Vhukomba':¹⁰

During this week the girls are taught all about womanhood and the way in which she can entertain her future husband. In this ceremony she is also subjected to a rigid discipline and her physical fitness is tested. She is also taught that the uncircumcised are weak persons and that she should not get married to such individuals....¹¹ The old women are also relying on the women with one or more children who illustrate the customs of married life. The girl is taught to respect the elders and to observe good order in the family. The principles of cleanliness in her sexual life are emphasised very strongly. She is taught how to plan her family by spacing her children. She is also taught to obey the parents in matters of observing the laws and customs of the Basena (Mathivha 1992:48).

Each Lemba community has its own kind of women's league to help one another during the initiation of women, but as far as my knowledge goes, neither the Lemba groups in Venda and Sekhukhuneland, nor those in Zimbabwe, perform female circumcision by means of an operation, although they do have initiation schools for the girls. During my second visit to Sekhukhuneland (1997) this notion was reinforced. The chief's mother, Mante Mpaketsane, and other women confirmed that no operation whatsoever is involved during the initiation process of the girls, but that they do agree with the rest of Napi's version of the ceremony (D:I:5-7). They explained that the main reason for dipping the girls into cold water (and beating them) is mainly to make them tough. But, according to them, there is no operation involved. They supposed Napi gave me the wrong impression simply because he (a male) did not know exactly what was happening during the initiation ceremony for girls and could only guess. The possibility exists that they could, in fact, have had a ceremony for the girls in the past which included some kind of operation. However, this requires further investigation.

Be this as it may, the period spent in the mountain is a respite in nature, before assuming the cultural responsibilities of wife and mother. In a way this ritual acknowledges the young women's uncertainty during this transitional period in their lives.

The New Moon ceremony

Some of the interviewees remembered that they once had a sabbath or a day of rest. It is noteworthy, however, that they put much emphasis on the observance of the new moon and all the rituals that should accompany it. Interestingly, the traditional Lemba consider the day of observance of the full moon as a day of rest, as the Jews would consider the Sabbath.

During my field research I found very few Lemba who still know the ceremony surrounding the New Moon Festival. Most of the respondents in Sekhukhuneland and Zimbabwe could only remember that, according to their culture, 'they must remove their hair every month when the new moon starts.... So the head must always be shiny' (D:M:7). Most of them still keep this custom of shaving their heads.

During a special LCA Conference in April 1995, Mhani (Chaplain of the LCA) explained the activities surrounding the New Moon Festival in the Lemba communities. Just before the time of the new moon, a bowl is placed under a tree or in the shade of a hut. Then a day before the moon is seen by anyone, sometimes two days before the moon becomes visible, it reflects in the water in the bowl, usually around noon. The person who sees the moon before the others shouts: '*Ha lea e bonala lapeng*' ('You were not there when I came home'; [the moon] is not visible at the lapa) and runs to the chief to inform him. Then the chief sends his servants to the river to see if they can really see the moon in the dish. Marole informs one that if they confirm this, the chief will *blow the horn* and the 'indunas' (a Zulu word used by Marole) will follow suit, blowing their horns (1969:4; cf **Photo 25**). When the people hear the horns, they will leave everything behind and run to the river. All the old men and old women shave their heads and everybody *fasts* for the rest of the day. The following day *no work is done*. It is kept as a day of cessation and everybody brings food to the chief. That evening the Lemba will look at the moon and say, 'This is the batsetse's [heathen's] moon, our moon has been seen in the pot.' Mathivha (D:1:B:5) explains that if a person's head is not clean-shaven he or she becomes foolish. The Lemba women specifically shave off their hair to become wiser.¹² This ritual is accompanied by different chants and songs.



Photo 25 *Horn blower in India Village, Sekhukhuneland*

Stayt (1931:232) refers to a new moon ceremony among the Basia, recorded by Ellenberger and MacGregor (1912) in their history of the Basuto:¹³

tradition tells of an ingenious method in use among the Basia, whereby the crescent could be detected in the sunlit firmament with the minimum of trouble to the observer. An earthen pot, made of glazed pottery, was filled with very clear limpid water, and as soon as the crescent appeared, it was reflected in the water even in the most glaring sunlight, and the first observer to discover the reflection in his pot ran to report to the chief, who announced the fact and summoned the feast by messengers. The successful astronomer was, according to custom, declared to be ruler of the feast, and was entrusted with the distribution of the refreshments.

Could this *Basia* be the same group as the *Vhasia* mentioned above (cf Chapter Three)? This custom accentuates some of the many differences between the Lemba and the other tribes. For the Lemba this is a sign of festivity and wisdom.¹⁴ Thompson recorded (1942) that the Lemba's New Year begins when the new moon is first seen at the end of the month of November.

During a recent visit to Yemen, Parfitt (1992) was informed about the customs and traditions of the tribes of the *wadi* Sena (the people in the vicinity of the old city of Sena) and was surprised to find that they have the same new moon celebrations as

practised by the Lemba in Southern Africa. Nowhere else during his many travels could he find this same practice. In the world-view of the Lemba the new moon ceremony accompanies the transition from one cycle in nature to another.

Rituals of sacrifice

A sacrifice is like a gift that opens communication with a god and also establishes good relations, but sincerity on behalf of the one sacrificing is a prerequisite. Because the parties in the relationship, that is, humans and gods/God, are not equal, the human being 'has to make his sacrifice into an act of praise. Praise or worship acknowledges the god's might as well as the inferiority of the worshipper' (Smart 1995:123-128). Smart (1995:124) is of the opinion that 'The victim is killed because it is taken out of the visible world and sent to the unseen world Burning a sacrifice ... transforms the victim into sky-going smoke and the essence of the sacrifice rises up and disappears in the direction of the abode of the gods.'

Lemba respondents likewise indicate that offerings are seen as a gift to God through the ancestors, but that this has no connection with the expiation of sin as is often the case with other religious groups (Mathivha 1999b).

The Pesah

The Lemba sometimes combine the circumcision of the boys with what they call the *Pesah* (Passover). According to the priest Zvinowanda they sacrifice a lamb or whatever animal is available, but they emphasise that they do not follow the church calendar in determining the dates of these festivals (D:A:4-6; cf D:M:11,12):

during circumcision initiation we also take a sheep and then slaughter - put it on the altar as a sacrifice for the circumcision to appease God, we are still doing it.

No further detail is known about this sacrifice. This custom could be a result of the influence either of Christianity or Judaism or it might be a remnant of the ancient religion of early Israel.

Thevhula and unleavened food

De Vaal (1958) records the annual (usually in July) so-called *thevhula* ceremony, during which the Lemba come together to worship and to bring sacrifices. Depending on the occasion, he observed that three kinds of prayers are used: a prayer for the *dead*, a prayer for *sickness* and one for *joy*. In preparation for the *thevhula* young women grind hard mealies which have not been soaked and *nothing fermented* may be used. On a

specific day the people wash themselves carefully, shave their heads and sit in a circle. Then they take a *spotless, black bovine*, or a black goat in the case of a smaller group, and place it in the middle of the circle. The priest will then rise and pray for the victim in the tshiKaranga language, with a sharp knife, smeared with red stone, in his hand.

According to Van Warmelo (1966), the ancestors are enumerated in genealogical order and everyone is represented by a spear (*cf Photo 26*). Each one's place of birth and dwelling place are remembered, for example: 'Buba from Nyao'cla.' In this way significant information is transmitted from one generation to another. The priest ends his prayer with 'amune' (= amen), after which everybody repeats after him 'amu, amune, amu' (amen). Then they slaughter the animal by *shedding the blood on the ground*. Even in 1905 (:101) Hall describes the 'defilement of eating flesh containing blood' as well as the 'sprinkling of worshippers with blood' as some of the 'distinct Jewish customs' of the Karanga-speaking Lemba.

While the meat is cooking, the young men start dancing and when the meat is ready, they gather together again and repeat a certain prayer with the priest who again ends it with 'amu, amune'. At this stage they eat the meat without any salt and put the bones neatly together.

With regard to the above meaning of *thevhula*, Mathivha (1999b) explained that it is the Shona who use the word *thevhula* for their specific prayer-meetings, not the Lemba. According to him the ceremony with the spears referred to by Van Warmelo is indeed



Photo 26 *Spear ceremony demonstrated at LCA Conference, with figurine at the end of the spears*

called *thevhula* (among the Lemba) and these meetings are usually held when they are facing the army of the enemy. They point the arrow or spear in the direction of the enemy. The Lemba are known for their specific skills and use of magic during warfare.

However, Mathivha also mentioned that the Lemba have yet another practice called *thevhula*, which refers to the occasions when they meet 'to use magic in order to hurt somebody' (especially an intruder). Usually such a person's movement (hands or legs) will be affected in one way or another, but he or she could be cured by his or her own people's traditional healer. In view of Mathivha's comments, it seems as though some of the elements of the *thevhule* became intermingled in different people's communities. This is not unusual since the Lemba have always lived among other people (although separately) and observers from outside could easily come to wrong conclusions.

Nevertheless, the Reverend Schlömann (1894:65) also emphasised, among the other special customs of the 'Malepa' (Lemba), that the 'Malepa' held *prayer meetings* more frequently than other natives, they used a special language¹⁵ of which they did not know the meaning themselves and he added that they concluded their prayers, *addressed to the ancestors*, by the Hebrew word 'amina'. Schlömann also mentioned that the number *seven* is sacred to them. Wangemann (1868:437) found that before they pray they first wash their hands and dress in white clothes and then they pray: '*ha mena oa honzó oa farafatela oa helezano oa honzo oa helezana oa farafatela*.' Even at that stage Wangemann indicated that not even the Lemba knew the meaning of the prayer anymore.

An informant, Mosheh (Jaques 1931:249), remember a funeral ceremony (closely related to the rituals above) from his childhood. Only the men were present and they wore their lion-cloths the other way around and took all their ornaments from their necks and put them aside. The Lemba who took the lead, girded his lions with a *sekgwele* (a cotton cloth), probably with ceremonial significance. The a spotless beast, sheep or goat was slaughtered and some of the *blood was drunk*¹⁶ by the men and the rest was *sprinkled over the worshippers*. They all knelt down and the leader prayed '*xo ndziye*' (meaning not known). Then the priest prayed to their *ancestors* and called them by name. Some of the words in the prayer were: '*A sasa sa e se a bona, Mose a vuye popa, munhu umbi mutsa mbona kwava ku fa, wa enda*', freely translated as

Let Moses return to us again.

Man is evil.

We'll not see a man like him again.

Death is a journey...

(Jaques 1931:249).

This prayer was also ended with 'amin'. Then the meat was eaten and they went to swim in the river. Mention of Moses occurs quite readily in Lemba traditions.

First Fruit and Harvest Festival

Another festival that seems to reach back to an Old Testament festival (cf Dt 16:11; Is 9:2; Lv 23:10) is the Feast of the First Fruits.¹⁷ The older people in the community can still recall how they took part in such an occasion once a year. Mathivha (D:1:B:24) remarks that although ‘the majority of the Lemba are converted to Christianity, in their practical time they stick to their First Fruit Festival. They stick to the time around December and others when they collect all the seeds’ (cf the Makapola festival). The ingathering of the seed usually takes place during springtime. On these occasions the horns are blown and thereby God is requested to make their seeds fruitful and let them multiply.

Nabarro (1999), who accepted the Jewish faith and had a Jewish husband, in the 1950’s came across a very fascinating group in the 1950’s (long before they knew about the Lemba or the Mwenye) in Southern Central Mozambique – then still a Portuguese colony. They mentioned that there was somebody with a kudu-horn, and the man was playing little musical phrases. This struck them as being extraordinarily like the Jewish New Year service (*shofar* ceremony in September). The man did not just play, but somebody called the name of the phrase and then he sounded the phrase. The Nabarro’s recorded these calls and played them to other Jewish scholars. They compared them to those in a Jewish prayer book reflecting the playing on a Jewish New Year’s day in the synagogue, to determine how they corresponded to the recordings made in central Mozambique. It appeared later that the group was most probably the Mwenye, who are closely related to the Lemba in South Africa. It was only later found that the Lemba (in South Africa) employ similar calls on the horn when they proclaim call the ingathering of the seeds. Mathivha explained that horn blowing is used for calling together meetings (usually in September), when they ask God to bless and multiply their seeds.

Ratsoma from Apel in Sekhukhuneland remembers that the First Fruit Festival took place after the first fruit (he remembers the sorghum) was harvested (D:3:A[2]:7,)(8). He then actually demonstrated how they knelt down to drink from a pot, while the women poured a special brew of the sorghum into the pots. It is noteworthy that his mother took the lead in this ceremony, during which she usually prayed to their forefathers for a blessing on the food. He remembers that the children would drink and eat first at such occasions (D:3:A[2]:7,)(8; V:1:SEK; D:R:14).

Phophi refers similarly to a sort of harvest festival – their annual *Utungura* ceremony. During this occasion,

we can recite the names of our departed ancestors from the recent times to the distant-distant past. The spirit of one of these ancestors has the job of keeping the names of all the rest just in case we forget one or two. While we’re getting ready we take a special brew of sorghum and pour it on the ground as a, what you’d call, libation. Then we recite the names (cited in Parfitt 1992:51).

Ratsoma (D:3:A[2]:7,8; D:R:14) explains that the first fruit ritual was also a method to keep sicknesses and demons away. Perhaps this was also the purpose for the *Utungura* ceremony, if it was not the same festival.

Fasting

Very few of the respondents indicated that they fasted. One such example is Phophi who explained to Parfitt that his father told him that long before the arrival of the Europeans, the Lemba held a day of fasting once a year. On that day the leader wore a white cloth and the chief sacrificed an *unblemished black ox*. According to Thompson (1942:77), some of the meat was sacrificed at the graves of the ancestors and the remains of the meat was eaten. However, the meaning behind this fasting is not clear.

Other sacrifices

Before a *new kraal* is occupied the priest sacrifices a sheep and sprinkles the blood on one of the upright posts and on one of the rafters of each hut. The rest of the blood is sprinkled on the ground of the kraal. Then the meat of the animal is consumed by the members of the kraal.

Thompson (1942:77) also notes that a *new granary* must first be consecrated by a priest before it could be used. He sacrifices a *white fowl* and sprinkles the blood on the floor and inside the walls.

Ratsoma, who recently became a Christian, explains that when the Lemba have problems, they still take them (by means of a sacrifice) to their ancestors (as already mentioned above, cf Chapter 5):

other times I try to kill something,¹⁸ 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 God because we must tell the God [ancestors] that we are suffering and I want this and this. We eat all the food at the graveyard, we don't take it home (D:3:A[1]:8.9; [my insertion and endnote]).

Ratsoma (D:3:A[1]:8,9) maintains that he has had more success with the cult of the ancestors so far, but he is willing to learn as far as the Christian way is concerned.

Rites in early Israel

Rituals of passage

Male circumcision

In terms of this custom in early Israel, De Vaux (1973:47,48) argues that circumcision was probably originally an 'initiation-rite before marriage', 'which makes a man fit for normal life'. This was also intended to be an initiation into the respective clan (cf the story of the Shechemites in Gn 34). Eilberg-Schwarz (1990:147) stresses that the 'priestly author' in the Old Testament frequently refers to human fertility and its the results thereof in terms of the Covenant of God with Abraham (cf Gn 1:22; 9:1,7; 27:28,29; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; as well as the preoccupation with detailed genealogies by the 'priestly author', Gn 5:1-28; 30-32; 10:1-7; 11:10-26; 25:12-18; 36:1-14; 46:6-27 and Ex 4:24-26).

A confirmation of this is found in the story in Exodus 4:24-26 (NASB), where Moses was returning to Egypt:

Now it came about at the lodging-place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood" - because of the circumcision.

In this story and in other narratives circumcision is ostensibly compared with marriage: after Zipporah circumcised her son with a sharp stone (cf Jos 5:2,3), she 'threw it [probably the part which had been removed] at Moses' feet' ('feet' is probably an euphemism for the action of 'touching his [Moses'] genitals' [my insertion]; De Vaux 1973:47). Gispén (1964:61) maintains that the 'touching of Moses' feet' with the foreskin of her son is symbolic of the sacrifice (namely, her son's circumcision) that she had to bring in order to be married to Moses. Kruyswijk (1935:24) suggests that the significance of this story involves the promises of the Covenant with Yahweh. It is on account of the Covenant that God wanted to deliver his people from Egypt. For this reason, Moses and his family had to comply with the covenantal stipulations first, before he could become an instrument in the hands of God.

Some maintain that Moses himself was not circumcised, thus the circumcision of his son protected him as well. Why this would have been neglected is unknown, but now Moses was protected by the blood of his son and is called, therefore, a 'bridegroom of blood' (De Vaux 1973:47). Gispén further explains that Zipporah calls Moses thus, since she wanted to express her feelings about the cruelty of having to circumcise her child. Yet she realised that she could not have her husband in any other way. Kruyswijk argues that Zipporah uses this word to indicate that she had received her husband back from death through the bloody circumcision of her son (1935:24). The Hebrew for 'bridegroom', 'son-in-law' and 'father-in-law' derive from the same root, *hatan*, which

in Arabic means to 'circumcise' (De Vaux 1973:47; cf Gispén 1964:61). The agreement could possibly refer to an earlier covenant usage, when a young man was still prepared by his father-in-law by the circumcision ritual for marriage.

The ritual of protection by blood, is in a way similar to the smearing of the blood (of the sacrificial lamb) on the doorposts during the celebration of the *Pesah* (Passover), as a sign of the renewal of the Covenant (Ex 12:24). Just before the Israelites left Egypt and just before the 'entrance into the Promised Land', it is mentioned that they connected circumcision (also as renewal of the Covenant) to the celebration of the *Pesah* (cf Jos 5:2-5).

De Vaux (1973:47,48) stresses that the connection of circumcision to the Covenant with Yahweh imbued this ritual increasingly with a religious character and separated it from its sexual connotation. Eight days after birth of the child, circumcision was performed (according to the Law, Lv 12:3) as a religious rite with a purification function, which acted as a sign of the Covenant with Yahweh (Gn 17:12-13; 21:4). According to the Book of Joshua (5:4-9), this practice was neglected during the sojourn in the desert, but it was resumed at the entry into the Land (De Vaux 1973:48). The operation was usually performed by the father by means of a stone knife (Gn 21:4,9) and in atypical cases by the mother (Ex 4:25, as in the above; Jos 5:2), and only much later by a doctor or a specialist (cf 1 Mac 1:61).

Often reference is made to the Philistines as the 'uncircumcised' (Jdg 14:3; 15:18), but this term is never applied to the Canaanites. This could imply that the latter practised circumcision or that the Israelites possibly took this custom over from them. Thus it was an early practice in among early Israel. Moreover, it is possible that there is no reference to the Canaanites as 'uncircumcised', since the Israelites originated from them. Be that as it may, this communal custom could be one of the reasons why the clans of Israel so readily assimilated with the Canaanites.¹⁹

The origin of this ritual of male circumcision is thus still very uncertain, but Gutmann (1987:3 and others) describes it as a '*rite de passage*, an *initiation rite* symbolically marking the boy's death and resurrection and his acceptance as a full member of the community [*my italics*].'

Other scholars describe the male initiation ritual as a '*pars pro toto* – a substitute for castration or human sacrifice', an outward or ethnic identification, or merely a practice for medical or hygienic reasons, especially in the desert, where water for washing was very scarce. Gutmann (1987:4) also mentions that it was associated with 'marriage or fertility rites'. However, the later Jewish tradition was linked to the events in Genesis 17.

According to the ceremony of the covenant, God and Abram had to receive *new names* after their agreement. God's name became Yahweh and Abram became Abraham. Even Sarai became Sarah (Gn 17:5). At a later stage, after his struggle at the River Jabbok,

Jacob was called Israel. New names were usually linked to the deity with whom the covenant or agreement was made.

The initiation ritual for women

As far as is known, circumcision for women did not occur in Israel, but the possibility of a special occasion during which young women underwent a kind of initiation as preparation for adulthood, more specifically for marriage, did exist (cf Jephthah's daughter in Jdg 11).

The dramatic story of the judge Jephthah who had to sacrifice his daughter after a military victory (Jdg 11:29-31) was possibly not unfamiliar during those times. Everybody in the story appears to be quite satisfied with the state of affairs – the only ostensible sadness was that the daughter had to die a virgin. Rea (1988:358) surmises that Jephthah promised Yahweh a human sacrifice with premeditation. He probably intended to sacrifice a slave, since an animal sacrifice would have been too insignificant to serve as a sign of a solemn promise to Yahweh. The LXX's translation of Judges 11:31 of 'whoever may come out', also endorses such an interpretation. Rea points out that Jephthah lived amongst the 'heathen', who regularly brought human sacrifices to their gods (cf 2 Ki 3:27). Jephthah could have judged wrongly that 'Jehovah would need to be propitiated by some offering as costly as those which bled on the altars of Chemosh and Moloch' (Farrar, cited in Rea 1988:558). For this reason he promised a burnt sacrifice to Yahweh. The fact is that Rea stresses the argument of Farrar: that Jephthah did not merely 'sacrifice' his daughter to a life of celibacy, since there are no records that females who served at sanctuaries should be virgins (cf Lk 23:36). However, if it were the case, that might be a reason why Jephthah's daughter went to the mountains with her friends to lament her virginity, which could have formed part of a regular initiation ritual.

Lemche (1988:216) sees this narrative merely as a story or legend that was widely known in the cultures surrounding the Mediterranean Sea area. This may confirm the notion that human sacrifices had been clearly imprinted in their memories.

Niditch (1997:115) stresses that Judges 11 becomes a model for and a symbolic mirror of a woman's passage of life. It suggests to every young woman, about to make the transition from her father to her husband, or from virginity to married life (in this case from life to death), that she is to be sacrificed by leaving the safety of her home. A young woman and her family may well regard her new husband and his family as the 'fearful other'. This ritual acknowledges that transitions in a woman's life are fearful and could evoke sadness.

The New Moon ceremony

Grant (1984:59) points to the custom observed by the Babylonians and the Canaanites, who set a day aside concerning their cult of the moon. Interestingly, the observance of the full moon is called 'sabbath', derived from *shabbatu*, the Accadian word for full moon. In the Bible the word sabbath is often connected to the new moon (e.g. Am 8:5; 2 Ki 4:23; Ezk 46:1; Is 66:23). However, the day of the new moon was regarded as dangerous. The Israelites could possibly have associated their labour and toil in Egypt with this day and thus considered it as a day of safety and rest to be celebrated in their 'Promised Land'.

Wolfe (1982:87) and others are convinced that the fourth commandment (Ex 20:8), namely to keep the Sabbath, is not correctly translated. He is of the opinion that it should read: 'Remember the day of the *cessation*, to keep it holy' [italics mine]. According to him, the notion of 'cessation' was replaced by post-Exilic redactors six centuries later, when their notion of 'sabbath' had developed. He maintains that it was Moses who gave this command in order to distinguish Israelite religious practices from other religious practices. He proposes a free translation: 'Remember the holy day to keep it sacred!' Thus it does not refer to 'sabbath', as it was known later, but to a day of cessation equivalent to the New Moon celebration.

Although difficult to prove, it seems as if there could possibly have been mention of a holy day, a *day of cessation* in early Israel. The possibility that it could have had the same content and significance as acquired by the Sabbath later in history, is improbable.

The first day of each month was considered to be holy, hence the association in the Old Testament of the monthly 'new moon' with the weekly sabbath (e.g. Is 1:13). This new beginning was inaugurated by special sacrifices (Nm 28:11-15) which were made when the *horns were blown* (Nm 10:10; Ps 81:3).

Rituals of sacrifice

Without referring to the significance of each respective sacrifice, I shall briefly deal with the general religious significance of the sacrifices. To make a sacrifice was probably the most important cultic activity among the clans of Israel. Sacrifices were considered to be acts of worship by themselves, according to De Vaux (1973:471). He points out that the three major annual feasts which were accompanied by sacrifices, namely the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (March/April), the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks later, and the Feast of the Ingathering in Ex 23:16, later known as the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sept/Oct), were shared with the Canaanites. According to Canaanite beliefs, Baal controlled the seasons. Therefore it was of extreme importance that the Israelite farmer not only maintained his relationship with Baal, but also that with Yahweh. According to

historical tradition, he was in a relationship with Yahweh and he could seek Him as a refuge in times of crisis. In spite of the sacrifices made to other gods, Wolfe (cf Jdg 5:8; 6:25-32; 8:33; 10:6-16), surmises that Yahweh remained the most important deity in the Israelite religion (especially later in history).

Gray (1949/50:207) is convinced that almost every possible act of sacrifice was taken over by the Israelites from the Canaanites. According to him it was the Ras Shamra texts especially that cast light on this matter. However, to almost every one of these borrowed elements, the Israelites gave new meaning and content, although old practices continued.

Schmidt (1983:129) explains that apart from during the feasts, there were also many other reasons why Israel made sacrifices, namely to bestow a gift, to bestow honour, to show gratitude and to experience fellowship with Yahweh and with one another, or to do penance. Therefore, sacrifices were used exclusively to express the relationship between humankind and God. Schmidt is of the opinion that, although the notion of providing food to the deity occurred during Old Testament times, it was never the main purpose (cf however, Van der Toorn 1996). Schmidt also maintains that the cultic community sought fellowship with Yahweh by means of their religious practices and thus wanted to strengthen their relationship with him. Von Rad (1962:26) and Kraus (1966:121) link this custom with: Purification, cleansing, or reconciliation which could be brought about by means of the sign of blood – blood had to flow to effectuate reconciliation. Kraus (1966:114) understands the significance of sacrifices as follows:

In the gift offering a powerful intention is directed from the giver to the one to whom the gift is offered. The deity is meant to receive homage, gratitude and reverence in the gift, but the original conception of feeding the spirit is in the background. The Ugaritic texts show us what significance this supply of power had in Canaanite religion.

Therefore, it seems to be that sacrifices were the central feature of Israelite ritual life – a means of mutually mediating the relationship between God and humans by sacrificing something of value. It was also a means of mediating between people, who share in a portion of this precious food source (Niditch 1997:103).

The Passover or Pesah

The Passover (*pesah*, Lv 23:5) was probably the oldest and only feast which 'Israel' (that is, some proto-Israelites) had already celebrated before their settlement in Canaan, and was a feast linked to their exodus from Egypt. Possibly this feast was eventually (probably not in the time of the Judges) linked by Israel to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. According to Joshua 5:10-12, the first *pesah* was celebrated in the Promised Land in the times of the Judges. Later (cf 2 Ki 23:21-23) it was presented as the height of

Israelite spirituality. The link between *Pesah* and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, probably took place in the times of the Judges. The Passover or *Pesah* was probably first only celebrated in each family or clan in each home and was centralised only later. However, Kraus (1966:47) draws makes a clear distinction between the Canaanite Feast of the Unleavened Bread, which had a distinct agricultural character, and the Passover which had a semi-nomadic origin.

According to Niditch (1997:102-106), the foundation text for the Passover is to be found in Exodus 12, where the emphasis is on the animal sacrifice, specified as a one year old male lamb or goat, sufficient for a family or a number of families. No uncircumcised person might join in the meal, which takes place in a sacred setting. The meal binds those who share the meal by means of the special ritual/s that are observed. The participants are bound by the blood that is shed and they participate in the eating of roasted flesh in communion with the deity. Niditch (1997:104; cf 1993:60) describes this meal as an 'unbanquetlike repast marking a rite of passage or transition from the status of slaves to the status of free men and women'. 'The question remains whether this was a pre-monarchical institution, or whether it this was a retrojection of later practices.

Shedding of the blood was sanctified and had to take place in the prescribed fashion (Dt 12:16,23) along with the slaughtering of the animals. The latter was not undertaken lightly. The blood had to be applied to the lintel and the doorposts of each house. When this requirement had been met, then God's angel of death would pass or skip over Israelite houses during that night; hence the notion of *Passover*.

On the same night, the lamb or goat was roasted or burnt with head, legs and organs still intact. It was then hurriedly eaten along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. The participants were girded at the loins, wore sandals and had a staff ready in the hand. This was a symbol of the Israelites who had to leave Egypt in a hurry (Ex 12:39). This celebration taught the children about the saving deeds of God and Israel's escape from Egyptian oppression and slavery. Exodus 12 is, therefore, a narrative 'about threat and fear and the desire to escape, with overriding themes of group solidarity and the making of transitions' (Niditch 1993:52).

The Festival of the Unleavened Bread

De Vaux (1973:490) states is of the opinion that the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Ex 23:15) could for instance have indicated the beginning of the grain harvest, when the first sheafs were gathered (Ruth 1:22). The word 'unleavened' or 'unleavened bread' derives from *matzoh*, 'bread of misery'. Thompson (1988c:55) explains that the grain was harvested in March (Abib), about seven weeks or fifty days before the wheat in May-June. According to Numbers 28:16-25 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8, sacrifices of dedication were brought on the first day and the last day, and *no ordinary work was done*.

For seven days in the month of Abib (March), the Canaanites ate unleavened bread during this feast (Dt 16:1; Ex 23:15). The eating of the *unleavened bread* was an ideal opportunity for the Exodus group to call to remembrance the act of Yahweh's deliverance. Thus the story was also transmitted and kept alive for posterity. The question is inevitably whether the tradition did not in the course of time become entangled with the festive activities, so that it was no longer possible to distinguish between the elements of the Exodus story, and those of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

First Fruits or Harvest Festival

Another Canaanite agricultural feast was the Feast of the Ingathering, that later – possibly already in the times of the Judges – came to be known as the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. During these feasts, families entered the vineyards and lived for a week in makeshift shelters, while the harvest was gathered. Obviously, this was to remind them of their sojourn in the wilderness, and even in the times of the Judges, already, this tradition could possibly have been linked to a feast (Jdg 21:19). In fact, most of the Israelite feasts and rituals reminded them of important stories or events from the past.

The seven weeks until the Harvest Festival or Feast of First Fruits was calculated 'from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain' (Dt 16:9-11; cf Gn 30:14; Jdg 15:1; Is 9:2). During the first seven days of the grain harvest, bread made from the new grain and yeast was offered. Nothing of the previous harvest could be used, since the feast indicated a new beginning. According to De Vaux (1973:490), the first sheaf of the harvest was brought to the priest (*cohen*; Lv 23:9-14). A year old lamb without blemish was prepared as a burnt offering for Yahweh, 'two tenths of an ephah of fine meal [was] mixed with oil' was offered as a burnt offering to Yahweh, and a drink offer of wine was poured. According to De Vaux the offering to Yahweh was a very important element for the clans of Israel.

De Vaux (1973:493-494) also contends that there is no indication that this feast was celebrated before they settled in the Promised Land. Since it was a feast celebrated by established farmers, it was probably only taken over from the Canaanites by some Israelite clans once they were in Palestine. They then gave it new meaning and content. Both the Feast of Unleavened Bread as well as the Feast of Weeks were linked (it is uncertain when) to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement was probably not yet known or celebrated in pre-monarchical times. Most of our information comes from Leviticus (from the priestly author, which is much later), but since there are concurrences with other sacrifices and rituals among the Lemba, I briefly refer to it.

The priests were instructed to take extreme care when entering the Tabernacle. In contrast to Exodus 12, the role of the high priest in Leviticus 16:29-34 is central to the performance of the ritual on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). It was an annual ceremony that *cleansed the people of all their sins*. The sacrifice and the purification elements of blood and water played key roles. The *cohen* (priest) or the one who seeks atonement for his community himself had to be cleansed or purified by offering a bull for himself and his household. He wore special *linen garments* after he was cleansed by bathing.

Lots were cast to determine the fate of the goats, allowing forces beyond human reason to determine the actions one should take in a situation of uncertainty (cf Jos 7:14-18; 1 Sm 14:41-42). Two identical goats, the 'scapegoats', on whom the sins of the people were placed, were brought to be offered. One was for God and was sacrificed in the Tabernacle, the other was 'for Azazel' and was sent into the desert. The obligations for *Yom Kippur* (fasting, and others) were then described. The blood of the bull and the goat was applied to the horns of the altar and *sprinkled* with the finger seven times over the altar (Lev 16:1-20-27). The priest laid his hands on the goat and conferred upon it all the transgressions of the people, then the goat was sent into the wilderness. A reversal of the actions took place again to 'desecrate' the priest and his people. He removed his holy garment, bathed himself in water and put on his regular clothes (cf Lv 16:29-34).

Other sacrifices

Unfortunately, we are largely dependent on the Book of Judges for more information concerning the various sacrifices. Moreover, some scholars have misgivings about whether history is reliably reflected in the Book of Judges. A variety of activities surrounding the sanctuary (or house altar) took place, but some of the most important were the actual sacrificial practices. A few of these will be highlighted.

According to Schmidt (1983:127) the communal sacrifice, known as the 'sacrificial meal' was usually held within the family, clan or larger circle of invited 'tribes' as a holy meal (Jos 22:27). Thompson (1988c:1050) and Lemche (1988:216) call this sacrifice the 'thank-offering', while Kraus (1966:118) calls it a 'peace-offering' (Lv 7:11ff). *Communio* (that is, gathering the community unto Yahweh is the basis of the ritual) is its purpose (Kraus 1966:118). The fat was sacrificed to Yahweh and the rest was eaten together. Albertz (1994:102) remarks that the daily fare of the clans of Israel was mainly vegetarian. Only at such communal meals could they afford to eat meat.

Other sacrifices which are mentioned more generally differ in character from the burnt offerings. The 'food-offering' included many bleeding as well as non-bleeding sacrifices (Jdg 6:18). It is Schmidt's view that in the course of time the food offering probably lost its identity and became the animal sacrifice.

Kraus is convinced that the 'food offering' later became just a vegetable sacrifice and that after this, the animal sacrifices were referred to as the 'burnt-offering'. According to Leviticus 1:1-5:26, the animal was brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. The one who brought the animal placed his hands on it, and afterwards it was slaughtered and the priest *sprinkled its blood* on the altar. The animal was skinned and then cut into pieces which were arranged, washed and burnt on the altar.

Evaluation and comparison

To place circumcision (and other customs) in the Old Testament on an equal footing with the 'primitive' customs in the Lemba (and other) communities might be perceived by some as trespassing on holy ground. However, this will illuminate the significance of this ritual to both groups, provide thought provoking questions about 'Judaism' or 'Judaising groups' and possibly provide new answers.

Much more information concerning the ritual, the related teaching, its duration, when and where it took place and so forth, is known with regard to Lemba practice *vis-à-vis* that in the Old Testament. Of course certain information is also available from orthodox Judaism, but its customs are no longer the same as in the Old Testament, because on account of inner-Jewish migration.

Oral traditions among the Lemba, as well as the application of this custom, obviously keep their customs and traditions alive. With the Lemba the elders, the traditional healer, the witch doctor, the doctor at the hospital, the chief, the fathers and even the women who do the cooking play an important role in the performance of this ritual. Thus the entire community is involved. According to the available information from the Old Testament, it appears that as if especially the father and sometimes the mother were involved with the execution of the ritual (Ex 4; Gn 34). It is probable that eventually the Israelite elders at the gates played a major role in this ritual. Only much later was the help of a specialist or doctor used.

If the Old Testament circumcision custom was originally an 'initiation rite before marriage,' then it is not clear what the content of instruction was at such an occasion and how this was conveyed. It was probably still very similar to what is happening among the Lemba communities today. Instruction about cleanliness, the learning of secret formulae, observing of proper procedures (e.g. *kosher* killing; married life; how to entertain your husband), love for the truth and one another, respect for elders and parents and their history, takes place among the Lemba mainly by means of songs, chants and recitations that are taught and also by demonstrations.

De Vaux (1965:47-48) acknowledges that circumcision was probably a pre-marriage rite to make man fit for normal life (probably sexual life), but he emphasises that the connotation disappeared when it was carried out on the eighth day. This may be the case

today, but it seems as though if it was not always a purely religious act as is presented by Bible authors and scholars (cf Eilberg-Schwarz 1990:147).

The *covenantal* character linked to circumcision by the Lemba occurs mainly in the southern parts of Zimbabwe where Protestant and other missionaries performed dedicated service for many years amongst these communities. It seems as though the specific connection between circumcision and the covenant with the Lemba (at least in the beginning) was quite territorial. The possibility exists that they themselves added the idea of the covenant to their tradition or that it was 'suggested' by missionaries. However, it could also be that it was the only place where the original tradition remained. Either way, very early ethnological and other reports indicate clearly that the Lemba considered the practice of circumcision to be a commandment from God given them as an elect nation, and that this also distinguished them from the surrounding heathen nations. However, the significance of the circumcision ritual is in general still linked powerfully to the incorporation into a clan and specifically as preparation for the sexual aspect of marriage. In early Israel it was also a specific group, the so-called 'Moses people' during the Sinai experience, who were the initial carriers of the idea of the Covenant, which only later became part of the entire nation.

Napi remarked that after circumcision, the Lemba 'cut the hair of the boys just a little bit around their heads'. Later it struck me that this expression or practice is similar to a *metaphor* used in Jeremiah 9:26 for *circumcision*: 'who clip the hair of their temples'. Is this a coincidence, or could this custom have been a literal execution of the archaic metaphor that Jeremiah (9:26) uses for the circumcision? According to recent ethnographies root metaphors often provide a foundation for rituals and narratives (cf Eilberg-Schwarz 1990:25). The archaic expression, interpreted *literally*, may perhaps suggest authenticity. In other words the symbolic meaning of the expression for circumcision, may have become vague and was then 'wrongly' implemented literally. The question is: How old is this custom and where does it originate from?

It is striking that the Lemba also lay so much emphasis on the change of name, or give new names during circumcision or during initiation ceremonies. In view the light of Exodus 12, the similarity between circumcision and the Passover (*Pesah*) is likewise remarkable.

Customs such as circumcision clearly differ from community to community and factors such as nature and environment influence the way in which they live out their culture.

'Circumcision' (as some respondents called it), or the initiation of women during their years of puberty, fulfils a very important function during their years of puberty among the Lemba, while a similar practice was not in use in old Israel, as Old Testament sources seem to indicate. The possibility that a similar custom was in use among the clans of Israel should be considered carefully, especially when one thinks of the event when Jephthah's daughter had to mourn her virginity along with other young girls (Jdg 11).

Reciting the names of ancestors among the Lemba occurs among the Lemba at most rituals and ceremonies of their religious life, during burial ceremonies such as the *Gshamo*, the *thevhula*, festivals and prayer meetings. All these and other occasions are very closely integrated with the cult of the ancestors.

Sacrifices amongst the Lemba are of a totally different nature from those in early Israel. And yet, there are similar elements in early Israel, even though these may not agree in every particular. It appears that many elements of the religion of early Israel could be still present in the religion of the Lemba, but these have often become intertwined with other religious ideas, or they have become diffuse and were then assimilated into other rituals or customs from what was originally intended. The idea of an unblemished ox and the sprinkling of blood is often present among both communities.

We do have much more detail about certain rituals and customs among the Lemba, which may provide some understanding of the similar customs or rituals in the Old Testament. Many of the details in the latter have probably not been recorded, or could have been 'edited out' by later authors.

The matter of the day of cessation, which is linked to the new moon with the Lemba's observation of the new moon and the similar custom among the Babylonians, offers interesting possibilities of interpretation to the idea of the Sabbath in the Old Testament.

A table of similarities and differences between the ritual dimensions of the religions of early Israel and that of the Lemba, is presented below (see ADDENDUM III: Table 7). The comparisons again indicate that there are many points of congruence between the cultures in Africa and that of early Israel. The various kinds of rituals such as circumcision, initiation, sacrifices and the meaning behind these, may teach scholars much about Africa, especially where there may be voids concerning certain Old Testament themes. In this way scholars may be 'transposed' to a situation where rituals and ceremonies were experienced.

NOTES

1. The Hebrew phrase that most closely relates to this, I think, could be *el pharas*. *Pharas* meaning 'to make distinct', or 'to declare' or 'to separate' ('god of separation'). The Greek word *o* (second coming) could perhaps also be applicable in this context ('god of the second coming'). A possible Arabic meaning for this word should also be investigated.
2. The first President of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography interestingly describes his own circumcision and initiation interestingly in his autobiography. He remarks that for the Xhosa people (and other groups) the circumcision similarly represents the incorporation of males into their communities (Mandela 1994:24).
3. In the Xhosa culture flinching or crying out was a sign of weakness (Mandela 1994:26).

4. Cf Mandela (1994:26) for the same practice among the Xhosa people and Bryant (1949:490) for the same practice among the Zulu people.
5. 'The rabbis of the Talmudic period perhaps added *peri ah* (the tearing of the genital mucous membrane and laying bare the glans), and *metzitzah*, when the *mohel* fills his mouth with wine and applies suction either orally or through a mouthpiece to stanch the flow of blood' (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 133a-b, in Gutmann 1987:4). The latter practice has now been generally abandoned.
6. There might just be a possibility that this '*Ra*' originally had a connection with the Egyptian Sun god '*Ra*', especially if their view traditions that they came from the North are true (Motshekga 1998). But this needs further investigation.
7. However, Stayt ([1931]1968:138-140) explicitly states that this occurs with the Venda and certain Sotho tribes.
8. Female circumcision of course does not have any Old Testament connection; it is probably Arabic in origin.
9. These customs also occur among the Venda (cf Bullock [1927]1950:212).
10. Stayt ([1931]1968:138) indicates that the *musevetho* is the circumcision ceremony for women.
11. Similarly, in the Xhosa tradition an uncircumcised man may not marry. He may not be heir to his father's wealth or officiate in tribal rituals (Mandela 1994:24).
12. Dos Santos (cited in Gregson 1973:419) refers to the similarities between the practices of the 'Moors' in South-East Africa and those of the Lemba. He wrote: 'The Kaffirs hold a great feast on the day of the new moon and I think they got this custom from the Moors who are scattered about this land and do the same....' And again 'the principal observance, in which they are almost exact, is celebrating, with great feasting, every new moon, upon which occasion they usually get intoxicated - although their creed forbids them to take wine.'
13. Ellenberger, D E; V D M & Macgregor, J C 1912. *History of the Basuto*. London: Caxton.
14. Junod (1908:283) adds that the shaving of the head for the 'Suto' and the 'Thonga' is principally a sign of mourning.
15. According to De Beer, slaughtering, among Bantu-speaking peoples, is always related to the ancestral spirits. During the field research the same idea occurred to me. The occasions when it is not related to their ancestral spirits are more the exception than the rule.
16. This custom was also known in Egypt, Edom, Moab, Ammon and in Arabia (Jer 9:25) and was therefore not unique to Israel.
17. This is also a custom which occurred among all Black tribes. In particular, the Swazi's *Incwala* and *umemo* feasts, are similar and undoubtedly unique to themselves (De Beer 1997)
18. According to De Beer, slaughtering, among Bantu-speaking peoples, is always related to the ancestral spirits. During the field research the same idea occurred to me. The occasions when it is not related to their ancestral spirits are more the exception than the rule.
19. This custom was also known in Egypt, Edom, Moab, Ammon and in Arabia (Jer 9:25) and was therefore not unique to Israel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Law and ethics among the Lemba and in early Israel

Religions usually incorporate legal and ethical codes. The law incorporated by the fabric of a tradition or sub-tradition can be termed the ethical or legal dimension of religion. Clearly people do not always meet the standards they profess and often the standards which are inculcated by the dominant faith within a particular society may not be embraced by all members of that society. Smart (1989:17-19) distinguishes between the moral teaching incorporated in the doctrines and mythology of a religion and the real sociological effects on and circumstances of, those who adhere to the faith in question. In most pre-technical societies, religion is not just a personal matter, it is inherent in daily life. Judaism does not have merely ten commandments, but a complex of more than six hundred rules (from the Mishnah) which, according to Jewish people, were imposed upon them by God. Religion also involves a ritual dimension: for instance the injunction to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest is also an injunction to perform certain practices and rituals on the Sabbath.

It appears that laws or traditions, once written down in a culture, become exposed to its world-view and to editing by a redactor or writer, whereupon they are fossilised into set codes. These codes do not necessarily represent the real life-world of a community, but are often those of the editor or the writer. Therefore, they often do not relate to the real way of life.

The purpose of this chapter is to refer cursorily to some of the laws and codes used by Lemba communities, as well as to those that occurred in early Israel.

Law and ethics among the Lemba

In Africa, the Lemba have their own particular 'Judaic' oral laws, embedded in African traditional cultures, Christianity, Islam and other religions. Although they do not have any ancient texts with written laws or ethical codes, they have an oral culture through which they transmit legal and ethical codes from one generation to another. However, they also have an oral tradition that once they possessed an ancient book made of skin,

but that the Arabs destroyed that book. They say the book of the Arabs was known as the 'book of Allah', but the book of the Lemba was the 'book of the Mwenye' (Parfitt 1992:231). According to Daneel (1996), Mwenye is perhaps derived from a Shona word which means 'light' - thus 'book of the light', or in other contexts 'people of the light' or 'people who bring light' are mentioned.

The Lemba writer, M M Motenda-Mbelengwa, recalls:

My father told me that he had it from his grandfather that the Lemba had a priest and a Bible made of skin. He said that it was lost somewhere (cited in De Váal 1958:54).

Only recently, Mathivha (1992) has tried to commit most of their oral traditions and some of the legal and ethical codes of the Lemba to writing. However, my field research has shown that his book merely includes both fragments and expansions of data gathered during my field work (cf Chapter Seven). Laws or ethical codes are not meant to be complete. They are in a state of constant flux within the community. It seems as though the Lemba probably identified with the notion of 'Jewishness', because it confirmed and reinforced their own ancient traditions and laws. In the ensuing discussion, I shall briefly deal with the laws and ethical codes of the Lemba which seem to resemble those in the Old Testament. Then, I shall compare them to the laws and codes that possibly functioned in early Israel. Major differences between the two communities will also be highlighted.

The Covenant

A covenant relationship implies obligations to and for both parties involved, or codes which have implications for their everyday life-situation. The sign of incorporation into the Covenant is circumcision.

In the Lemba, it appears (as already mentioned) that mainly groups in Southern Zimbabwe, specifically, link circumcision with the Covenant which God (Mwari) has with his 'chosen' people. Most of these groups regard circumcision as the occasion where 'new-comers' become part of the Covenant of Mwari (D:A:4; D:M:11,12). Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether they all observe the Covenant as a treaty between God and themselves. However, their self-identity shows that they perceive themselves to be in a special relationship with the God of Israel (as they regard themselves to be Israelites) and perceive the Covenant to be an order from God which they have to obey.

Runesu (D:L:8) explains that 'the *Covenant* applies to us that we are the children of Abraham and God' [my italics]. Even the *imam* Shef Ali Mutazu (D:O:7,10,11) agrees that circumcision is an order from God and that apart from any Christian or Islamic doctrines, the Lemba culture have their own specific laws which they have learnt during initiation and must still obey. These laws (the link to the Covenant) are supposed to be

hidden from the uncircumcised. They are probably not static, since they are not written down and may even vary from clan to clan.

The law

Many of the respondents refer to their specific guidelines as '*the law*'.¹ The high priest at Mberengwa said (D:A:5):

we always keep the law and we are still having it because we continue regarding our laws. We teach our children in a secluded place ... that they are very different from other people and they are part of the Covenant of God

Exactly *what* they teach (mostly during initiation schools) is not certain, but some of the laws and values I encountered are also reflected in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20). The following can be mentioned:

- (i) Although no two people's perception of God is identical, many Lemba said the worship the heavenly God *alone*. According to most respondents this God is the God of the Bible.
- (ii) Contrary to the second commandment of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), the traditional Lemba have an image (of a person) made of copper or gold (or other material) through which they pray to God (cf *Photo 26*). This figurine is seen as a symbol of God.
- (iii) One also observes traces of a belief that *children* often have to *suffer for the sins of their parents*: for instance, if the parents do not confess all their sins before their son is circumcised, he will certainly die. The Lemba place emphasis on blessings for the faithful and curses for the unfaithful.
- (iv) They are not only taught to have *respect* for God but also for their *parents and elders*. A deviation from this particular law is that children should not only pay proper attention to those who are still alive but also to those who have already died.
- (v) A few respondents remembered that they used to keep the *Sabbath*, but that was very long ago.
- (vi) The Lemba see adultery as sin. Sexual intercourse with a married woman (but not with an unmarried woman) is considered adultery.
- (vii) The Lemba consider stealing to be sin.
- (viii) To mix poison is also considered to be sin.
- (ix) Honesty and truth in all circumstances are stressed.

Many scholars have noticed that the Lemba 'codes' were different from other African people's, recorded that the Lemba observed the Mosaic Code and that their practices were enjoined by the Mosaic Code (cf Gayre of Gayre 1967:6,7; Wessman 1908; De Vaal 1958:54).

Case law

Covenant obligations

The Lemba adhere to numerous Covenant obligations, including:

Casuistic² laws

A casuistic law might be represented by the code mentioned above in the sense that, *if* the parents do not confess all their sins before their son goes for circumcision, *then* he will certainly die (D:M:11,12). The Lemba also believe that if they do not stop their evil practices, the 'heavenly God' will punish them.

Monetary compensation

Monetary compensation concerning a wife becomes valid when it is discovered, on the wedding night, that the newly wedded wife, for whom *lobola* had been paid, is not a virgin. Theal ([1898-1903]1964e:202-203) remarks that in such a case the *lobola* has to be paid back to the groom. Other informants argue that the parents of the bride have to pay the groom's family. When a woman commits adultery, it is not considered a cause for divorce, since it is not regarded as the woman's fault. But the man who is involved will be charged by the woman's husband – a certain amount of money or three head of cattle have to be paid.

Earning one's own living

The Lemba are not supposed to enslave themselves and are not supposed *to work for other people*, but rather to supervise them (cf D:J:[1]5). The argument is that they have learnt many skills such as pottery, building, metal and copper work (called *safuri*, bangles; D:M:2,3) from their ancestors and that they should earn their own living as far as possible. It might be pure coincidence, but many Lemba people I have met prefer to work or have worked for 'other' Jewish people before they started their own businesses (cf e.g. Luke Mpaketsane, Mr and Mrs Mack Ratsoma at Apel, Sekhukhuneland; D:J:[1]1,3; D:K:2; see **Photo 27**).

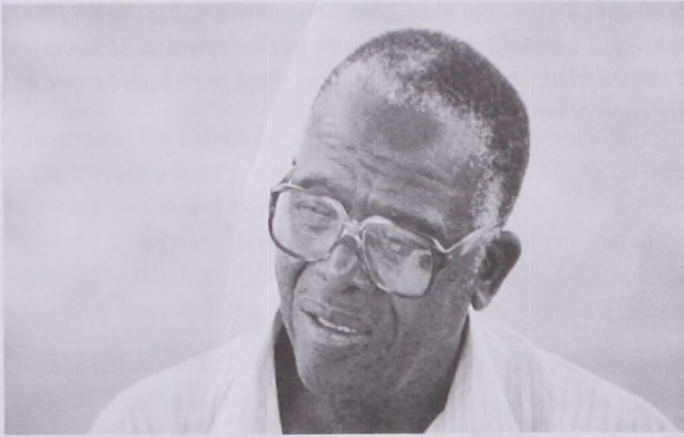


Photo 27 *Mr Mack Ratsoma, Apel, Sekhukhuneland*

Love for one's neighbour, care for the poor and showing hospitality

Love for one's neighbour (among them widows and orphans), care for the poor and hospitality are very important principles to the Lemba. They are convinced that they are obliged to help the poor, because they are created by God. They must give them something to eat and a place to sleep. In particular, the members of their own extended family who suffer should be looked after. According to Mathivha, they should be protected, fed, clothed and be provided with education and shelter. The extended family are obliged to look after one another.

A very appealing characteristic among the Lemba people – their *hospitality* towards strangers – reflects another facet of their ethical code. The friendly reception my husband (and at some stages my family) and I received in different communities could have been due to the interest I showed in their most precious inheritance, their history and practices. Nevertheless, the way they accepted and treated us and others in all their different communities in Southern Africa made a profound impression on us (*cf Photo 28*).

It was only after this positive experience during my field work in Sekhukhuneland and Zimbabwe that I remembered what Mathivha once said in connection with these codes:

The poor ones must look after the rich ones and the rich ones must look after the poor ones. It is not communism, other people mistook it for communism. It's not communism. Communalism is togetherness. You see according to basic African custom you are not allowed to laugh at anyone and you are not allowed to see anyone die of starvation. You take the old things, money, anything you give him so that he must not die in the street You must love that one because that one is also

God's creation. You must help him. You must give him something to eat. You must give him a place to sleep socialism will not work in Zimbabwe ... Africans are communalists, not communists, and in communalism there is rich and poor, but each must look after each other ... (D:1:A:17,18).



Photo 28 *Lemba women and children in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe, sharing their sugarcane with my children*

In view of what Mathivha has said it thus seems as if these communal values are part of most African communities. They are probably not unique to the Lemba.

Offerings made at childbirth

The Lemba code is that when a son is born a lamb has to be slaughtered and when a girl is born, a cock has to be slaughtered. The purpose of this custom is, according to them, to unite a child to the ancestors and finally to God, by means of the spilling of blood. Usually a child is given the name of one of his or her ancestors. It is understood that the spirit of this particular ancestor enters this child and protects him or her.

Family ethics and women

Chief, elders and a patriarchal family

The Lemba are communally organised into clans or lineages. Each lineage is headed by

its own chief (called *ishe* in previous times). Although authority in the villages is vested in the hands of the chief and of the elders, it does not seem that they wield absolute power over the others in the community.

Furthermore, the Lemba are a patriarchal community with their social organisation based on the extended family, which is the focus of life. This social organisation might differ from clan to clan and even from family to family. Women and daughters are subject to the authority of their husbands or fathers. This means that the father makes the final decisions in the extended family, but the wife also has an important role to play in the household. The husband will usually consult his wife in decision-making.

During the circumcision ceremony the boys are taught to respect their parents and elders in the community. They have to care for both the living and the living-dead (ancestors who have passed away).

Inheritance

Mathivha explains that both the sons and daughters inherit from their fathers. The heir is determined by the *lobola* cattle which were given by the man's father. He says:

The women are ranked³ according to the preferential marriage already given. It does not matter whether the cousin is married first or last, her children are the rightful successors to the estate. The heir does not inherit property only but also all the liabilities of the father (1992:51).

Mathivha explains that in the case where a woman marries another woman, the woman who paid the *lobola*, is set over the other woman. All *lobola* property goes to the primary woman and the children of the secondary woman inherit her property, while her primary children inherit from their father.

Virginity of women

In the traditional families a little ceremony usually takes place before the wedding. The bride's family brings a basket with a *kalabash* to the family of the groom. When the *kalabash* is still whole, it symbolises the virginity of the future bride. If it has a hole in it, it means the opposite. Many scholars point out that the Lemba take marriage seriously. Therefore, girls are subjected to inspection by old women to prove their virginity.

Women as items of chattel

Mathivha explains that all unmarried girls are the father's property and he receives all *lobola* cattle, since he is the father of the family. Daughters are therefore valuable items of exchange to the father.

Economic ethics

The Lemba stress the importance of economic justice. In fact, the economically *disadvantaged* and *foreign* people should be cared for, as well as provision made for the material needs of the priest. During the circumcision ceremony, the boys are taught specifically to love the truth and to be honest in legal transactions.

Dietary laws, cleanliness and other codes

One still finds strong remnants of the Lemba's earlier dietary laws, sexual taboos and arrangements for priestly groups.

Enemies within

One of the greatest internal threats to Lemba laws and codes is the danger imposed by 'cultural diffusion,' as they express it. Because of this, they can no longer adhere loyally to many Lemba rules and regulations, as they would have preferred. For instance, as a result of their assimilation with other groups, they no longer practise the laws of circumcision regularly on the eighth day as they did previously, much more intermarriage occurs and many traditions have been abolished (cf D:K:2).

No centralised authority to enforce these laws

The Lemba do not have any centralised authority to enforce their codes, except for the elders and the chief of the clan. The initiation ceremonies, however, play an important role in the entrenchment of certain codes, in the sense that those who attend the ceremony have to learn the laws and customs of the Lemba. If a person is not going to be circumcised, they have to pay the chief a certain number of cattle. A study of their history makes it clear that they often submit themselves to the chief in whose vicinity they live, although they keep themselves separate (from the local people).

Proverbs

Proverbs often entail unwritten laws and wisdom which should be considered in the daily life situation. Many proverbs exist among the Lemba people but 'cultural diffusion' has made it difficult to discern which are of Lemba origin and which are not. Because they usually live among other 'host' groups, speaking their languages, it is not always possible to discern which proverb is of Lemba origin and which is not. The following have been collected among the older people in the communities, but there might be many more (Mathivha 1999b):

Nasa ya la munuwa a i humi

'If a duiker eats a bean plant, it will repeat it.'

(If a person commits a mistake, he will commit it again [especially if it is sweet.])

Wa sa li pfa u vhadzwani u do li pfela vhulaloni

'If you do not heed a warning you will learn it when you are in bed.'

(Always take advice or you will regret it.)

Khosi ndi khosi nga vhathu

'A chief is a chief because of people.'

(A leader should not undermine his subjects.)

Vhuhadzi ndi nama ya thole ya fhufhuma ri a fhunzhela

'A wife's in-laws are like veal for if it starts to boil with froth, then one is in trouble.'

(Always stay cool with the in-laws because problems are part of life.)

Hu ambuwa vhunanga vhukololo a vha ambuwi

'The witch-doctor's/herbalist's art can be imparted but royalty cannot.'

(You can learn an art but not inherit it.)

Muvhuda a u na zwilalo zwivhili

'A hare does not have two sleeping places.'

(Do not handle more than you can manage.)

Thoho thema i laya thoho tshena

'A black head gives advice to the white head.'

(Even younger people can give the elderly advice.)

U luvha a hu na mapone

'To pay homage has no blisters.'

(You do not lose anything in paying homage.)

Ya longa khwanda yo nwa

'Once it puts its hoof inside (the water) it has drunk.'

(A mistake is a mistake.)

U beba a si u ka muroho

'To bear a child is not like collecting vegetables.'

(Said by a parent whose child is being ill-treated.)

A u lati nwana nga phadi

'You do not disown your child because of chicken-pox (eczema; minor things).'

(Your child is your child, in spite of his/her mistakes.)

Funguvhu lo ri thi laiwi la fhira mudi lo kovhela

'The crow said, I do not need your advice, and passed a home very late at night.'

(If you do not take advice, you will be in trouble.)

Li naka li tshi hoha linwe li tshi hohwa li ri mavhala anga

'It is nice to do good when you are hurting others, but when you yourself are being hurt you have concern.'

(Some people rejoice when they hurt others, but if it is their turn they are concerned.)

Hezvo zvavauya vachiti vanoda sadza mumba mangu ko, makwati acho aripi?

Sadza (porridge), referring to the daughter; makwati (bark) referring to the money (lobola).

(Since they say they have come to arrange a marriage with my daughter, where is the money?)

The latter is not a proverb but a saying with metaphors.

(Translation from Venda into English and explanation, Mr Sengani [a Lemba], Department of African languages, Unisa).

Some of these proverbs do, for example, occur among the Venda as well, but the Lemba are convinced of their Lemba origins. Obviously, there will be many more proverbs among the Lemba but these are considered by the older people as the most important ones. These proverbs deal mainly with relationships. That the explanation is often slightly different from what one expects when reading or hearing the proverb is also noteworthy. This has implications for the interpretation of proverbs: they should not be taken literally.

Law and ethics in early Israel

The Babylonian Dynasty left a number of laws, of which the Codex of Hammurabi is probably the most consequential (1700 BCE). Although five hundred years earlier than

early Israel, this Codex perhaps provides a good indication of what was possible by 1200 BCE. The possibility even exists that Israel made use of the Babylonian laws and other sources from the ancient Near East, or possibly the clans of Israel initially knew the Hammurabic laws, owing to trade between the two regions, but that they developed their own unique character on account of their religious traditions. On the other hand, De Vaux (1973:146) and other scholars find it improbable that Israel's civil legislation was of a Babylonian origin. According to Grant (1984:60), Israel's incontestable laws and the covenantal character of the law were quite unique.

The clans of Israel originally had an oral culture and therefore oral codes (legal and ethical), but to a certain extent, this mode ended about five hundred years later, when some of their oral traditions and legal and ethical codes were encapsulated in a number of the books of the Old Testament⁴ (some date these laws even later, e.g. sixth century BCE). These written laws were possibly only a selection of the laws and codes they had and were probably not meant to be written down. Perhaps these laws reflect much more of the world-view of the different writers and editors and therefore do not necessarily reflect existent Israelite law customs.

The Covenant

Exodus 20

From the pages of the Old Testament it is evident that one of the most important elements of the religion of early Israel was the Covenant, or Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Most of their laws and codes emanated from this. The patriarchs also refer to *El's* eternal Covenant which He made with Abraham and his posterity, together with the accompanying sign of *circumcision* for all males (Gn 17:7-11). McKenzie (1966:114-115) and others maintain that Israel regarded its laws as stipulations of the Covenant, according to which they had to live.

Exodus 20 can be seen as an 'abbreviated version of a treaty form' (Niditch 1997:71). The opening verses contain a brief preamble and a historical prologue, followed by blessings and curses in verses 5 and 6, and a set of stipulations or rules of behaviour required of Israel as the treaty partner.

Joshua 24

According to Noth (1943:47ff) Joshua 24 represents a feast of the renewal of the Covenant, where the *Covenantal stipulations* were read again and the people had the opportunity to choose whom they would serve in the future. Some other aspects of a treaty form which are absent in Exodus 20 are represented in Joshua 24 (and Deuteronomy), for example naming of witnesses and the provision for a deposit.

Joshua 24:25-26 specifically mentions Joshua giving the *book of the law* to the people at Shechem. The whole idea of the Covenant and its stipulations (laws) is very clearly stated on this occasion. Bosman (1991:210) maintains that, in spite of later editing, there may in fact have been a *core collection of legal stipulations*, which dated at least from the era before the monarchy.

The Ten Commandments (Ex 20)

The Ten Commandments can be roughly divided into two tables. On the one hand they deal with the way people should relate to Yahweh and on the other, with the way they should relate to one another.

All commandments emphasise the preservation of life and the property of others, and they reflect that one is not only what one does, but also what one feels and thinks (Niditch 1997:75). All the polemics of the prophets and archaeological evidence indicate that the codes do not necessarily represent the real life-world of the clans of Israel. There was probably more assimilation of other religions and deviation from the Decalogue, than we read about in the books of the Old Testament.

Case law

Casuistic laws

Deist argues (1991:118) that the laws in Exodus 21-23 were probably part of the common law which was conveyed orally in the community. Common law, especially as it occurs in the Covenantal Code (Ex 21-23) and elsewhere, involves the interpretation or the application of the law in everyday life, almost a type of situational ethics. For instance, is it as great a sin to steal bread when you are hungry, as it would be if you were to steal jewellery or other valuables (cf Niditch 1997:76)?

Monetary compensation (Exodus 21; 22)

The Covenantal Code shares some essentials with other Near Eastern and modern codes, such as monetary compensation, for example for slaves (Ex 21:6-7, 26-27,20; 22:1-15), the offering for the first-born (Ex 13:12-13; 34:19-20; Nm 3:41,45) and the economic worth of a daughter (Ex 21:7; 22:16). The offering for the first-born of humans and animals is described as a most valuable offering, a precious commodity. The writer often calculates human worth in financial terms.

Slavery (Exodus 21:1-12)

Like strangers, slaves were generally treated well. By legislation, special care was taken that slaves should be thus treated (Ex 21:2-11). Lemche (1988:93) mentions that a slave

had the right to marry and have children, while he still belonged to his owner. He is also of the opinion that the Hebrew word for slave, *eved*, can also be translated as 'worker'. Slaves had to be compensated for the work they did, or they had to receive a piece of ground on which they could become self-supporting. Such laws, dating from much earlier, probably polemicalised against earlier situations of abuse.

It was probably only because of debt or impoverishment that an Israelite could allow himself to become a slave. In such a case, he may also have only worked for a fellow Israelite and the slavery was temporary until he paid his debt. Apparently an Israelite who allowed himself to be enslaved by his own free will, was called a Hebrew (cf 1 Sm 14:21). For instance, the Israelites who found themselves in bondage in Egypt, were called Hebrews (Jagersma 1982:12). As the head of the home, a father could also decide to sell his daughter on the slave market when he was in debt.

Widows, orphans, resident aliens and hospitality (Exodus 22:21ff)

According to Niditch (1997:77,78) the most ethically appealing aspect of the Covenantal Code is the concern for widows, orphans and resident foreigners – the marginal figures of society. The society had to care for this category of people since God had mercy upon them. God is compassionate to members of the underclass and he is perceived as the court of appeal and the champion of such victims and the punishment of the oppressor is according to the principle of the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye; cf Ex 22:21,22,24,27).

Many scholars suggest that the prominence of *hospitality* in the Old Testament is partly due to Israel's nomadic origins (Selman 1988:494-495). Failure to provide for the traveller's needs was a serious offence and was liable to be punished by God (Dt 23:3-4) and people (1 Sm 25:2-38; Jdg 8:5-17).

Offering for the first-born (Exodus 22:29-30)

Bosman (1991:210) refers to the stipulation where Yahweh gave the command that the 'The first-born of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to me' (Ex 22:29-30) as a gruesome remnant from the pre-monarchical era. Wolfe (1982:13) surmises that in practice the first-born were never sacrificed, but were always replaced by a sacrificial animal.

Family ethics and women

Family codes reflect the intention to purify the community, which should be well-integrated and sound. The evil should be rooted out from Israel's midst (cf Dt 21). Some of these codes are reflected in the Book of Judges and in Deuteronomy.

Judges, elders and a patriarchal system

Within the segmented Israelite communities there was also mention of a loose social organisation, which probably varied from clan to clan or even from family to family. Only in times of need did a judge step in to lead the clans of Israel against the enemy. The heads of the families or the elders eventually began to play a greater role (cf 1 Sm 30:26-31).

Inheritance

According to De Vaux (1993:53-55) there is no mention of a written will in the Old Testament. Before the father's death, he verbally informed his family of the division of his possessions (2 Sm 17:23; 2 Ki 20:1). Only sons could inherit and the eldest usually received a double portion of the inheritance. Widows could not inherit, except when there were no children. Sons and female slaves could apparently also not inherit, except if they were adopted legally and daughters could only inherit if there were no sons (cf Nm 27).

The deceased's brother or nearest family usually married the widow and the children from that marriage were deemed to be those of the deceased.

Virginity of women

Another feature of the male-dominated system is the emphasis on a woman's virginity. A bloodstained cloth or chemise was exhibited after the wedding night, as a proof of the bride's virginity (Dt 22:13-21). Adulterous women and women found not to be virgins at the time of their marriage, were to be stoned (Dt 22:21,22):

Except for the absence of virginity as reason for divorce, there were also other circumstances that made it possible for a man to divorce his wife. However, it is difficult to deduce what the situation was in early Israel. De Vaux (1973:34-36) refers to Deuteronomy 24:1-2, where the possibility is mentioned that a man could decide to give his wife a bill of divorce, but his wife could not decide by herself to divorce her husband. Generally divorce was not condoned (cf Lv 18:20), because according to later (post-exilic) laws of purification (Lv 17-26) it rendered one unclean and it was considered to be a sin against oneself and Yahweh.

Women as chattels

Deuteronomy provides certain rights or protection for women, which are not necessarily related to early Israel and women were seen as valuable chattels (Niditch 1997). In spite of all the laws which were supposed to protect widows and orphans in society, the Book of Judges describes numerous situations within which women were simply at the

mercy of male dominance and authority. So, for instance, women were used as a human shield to protect men, they were raped, caught and stolen, even chopped into pieces, as it pleased men (cf the 'robbing' of virgins as described in Jdg 19 and 21).

Economic ethics

The perspective of the Deuteronomist (Dt 10:18) was that strangers enjoyed the special protection of Yahweh. He avers that strangers were indeed free in every respect, but that they did not enjoy the same civil rights as the Israelites, since all land belonged to the Israelites and for this reason strangers could only offer their services in the Promised Land for payment (Dt 10:18; 24:14).

Economic ethics largely involved the sabbatical (Dt 15:1-18): to give the land a 'sabbath' or rest, to free slaves, make loans to a borrower, to forgive debts and give the instruction not to charge interest to fellow Israelites (Dt 23:19).

Priestly codes in Leviticus

Leviticus 11

Niditch (1997:89) demonstrates that key aspects of priestly world-views are represented in Leviticus and Numbers. For instance, the *laws about clean and unclean* food found in Leviticus 11 reflect attempts to present a systematisation in daily living. *Uncleanness* was a more global metaphor for sin; one's behaviour towards others and one's relationship with God could be classified as *clean* or *unclean*. Uncleanness was also 'contagious', that is, these states could be transferred.

Sex taboos and prohibited marriages

Rules which regulated the body were also presented in terms of *cleanness and uncleanness*, and there were separate rules for men and for women (Lv 12; 15). Laws found in Leviticus 18 governed prohibited marriages. Marriage could not take place too far outside the ambit of the group, neither could there be marriages too close within the group (endogamy).

Priestly groups

A priest, called a 'teacher' or 'father' (Jdg 17:10), probably on the basis of heredity, came from well-known families such as from the posterity of Aaron (Nm 25; Jdg 18:30). The status of priest could therefore only be obtained through patrilineal inheritance. That is, a son could only become a priest if his father was a priest. The difference between the priests and the Levites is not always clear. We are probably dealing (in the Book of

Judges) with the beginning of the development of the priesthood, and it is possible that later developments were projected onto the times of the Judges.

Albertz (1994:58-59) accepts the description in Judges 17-18 as a very realistic picture of the Levites (from the clan of Levi), during the 'period before the state', as he calls it. To him, this narrative corresponds in more than one way with other information at our disposal. The inference can be drawn that the tribe or clan could appoint their own priest or priests as they thought best, as is mentioned in Judges 18:19. According to the story in Judges 17-18 the son, as head of the family, fulfilled the role of priest, until his father could appoint a Levite.

Who the Levites were, and what their actual connection was with the clan of Levi, is very uncertain. According to Judges 17:7-9 it appears that the Levites also fell into the same category as strangers or foreigners, since they could not possess any property or land.

Enemies from within

The writers of Deuteronomy argue strongly against the enemies within the ranks of the nation. They agitated for the wholeness and cleanliness of the society, and for uniformity in values. This stance may reflect a world-view from early Israel, when life and belief were very much perceived in terms of clear cut terms, those who worship other gods were to have been executed, child sacrifices were outrightly condemned (18:10) and the practice of consulting the dead (18:11,12) was utterly rejected as an abomination before Yahweh.

No centralised authority to enforce the Code of the Covenant

There is no specific reference to any centralised authority which could enforce the Covenantal Code. However, the reference to a 'leader of your people' (Dt 22:28) may refer to some kind of tribal or clan chief or judge.

Because of the fluid and segmented nature of the clans of early Israel, jurisprudence at the ground level either took place through the fathers of families, or through the elders of the town who met at the gates. It also seems as if the judges such as Deborah and Samuel possibly judged more widely than their own clans (Jdg and 1 Sm).

Proverbs

Deist (1991:117-119) and others suspect that during the times of the pre-monarchical period, certain proverbs existed which were conveyed from generation to generation within the ranks of the clans and were later written down. He refers especially to tribal or clan values (or clan wisdom), which he thinks is verbalised by Proverbs 10-16:

Poor is he who works with a negligent hand,
 But the hand of the diligent makes rich (Pr 10:4).
 The merciful man does himself good,
 But the cruel man does himself harm (Pr 11:17).
 The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,
 But the soul of the diligent is made fat (Pr 13:4).
 Better is a little with the fear of the Lord
 Than great treasure and turmoil with it (Pr 15:16).

It may be that these proverbs date from pre-monarchical times, but they could also have come from any other time in history. That the content of these proverbs could possibly reflect contemporary wisdom, indicates that their earlier stages could also have been applicable to early Israel. Proverbs usually entail some guideline in terms of which a group or people could measure their daily living. These proverbs, for example, reflect among other matters the world-view that hard labour and fear of the Lord are rewarded, but that laziness ends up in disaster. Mercy is also seen as a virtue against cruelty.

Evaluation and comparison

On closer investigation, it appears that some of the Lemba's legal and ethical codes closely resemble those in Exodus, Deuteronomy and especially those in Leviticus (with many traces of influence from the life-world of the Old Testament). Comparative laws which do agree with some of those of the Lemba occur in later sections of Deuteronomy. The Law in Deuteronomy overlaps with the Covenantal Code and the Ten Commandments in Exodus in the following ways: the importance of respect for parents, the command to worship only Yahweh and honesty in legal transactions. In Deuteronomy, however, the Sabbath is grounded in the Exodus and the remembrance of God's deliverance (Dt 5:15) and not in the creation, as in Exodus 20 (Niditch 1997:80; cf Ex 23:14-19). Observers from previous centuries similarly referred to these resemblances. If the Lemba have any remnants of the laws which originate from Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy it is impossible to determine this in a definite sense, but there are at least traces of a possible connection in the past. The Lemba obviously also have codes which do not concur with those in early Israel.

Although the Lemba have no written laws or regulations available in a holy book, an oral tradition holds that they have had a kind of book at some stage in their history. There is a strong remembrance that it was a kind of legal book and that the coming of the missionaries perhaps refreshed their memories of this book. They especially had a sense of '*déjà vu*' when they came into contact with the so-called 'Priestly Code', or maybe the missionaries made them aware of how their own customs and laws resembled those of the Old Testament. Some respondents contended that they *strictly* adhered to

the laws in Leviticus 11. Hence their tremendous emphasis on the laws of cleanness; in virtually every instance of self-identification these categories are mentioned. However, real life shows that not all of them live according to Leviticus 11. The same could probably have been said of ancient Israel. Written laws and codes represented the ideal as it was presented to the nation, but this does not imply full-scale adherence to the law.

It became clear to me that most Lemba rank their specific cultural laws or principles higher than any of those of the churches to which they belong. Other teachings are largely added to their existing cultural teaching or values. Most of their rituals and laws are in some way related to their spiritual or physical cleanliness.

The most important agreements and differences as they emerge from the discussion above are presented in table form below (see ADDENDUM III: Table 8). The legalistic orientation of many groups in Africa with a tribal system or within a clan could facilitate better understanding of the Old Testament in Africa.

NOTES

1. In the Zulu tradition, their law, not written, but wholly traditional or customary and, was 'based upon a strong foundation of experience, equity and logic' (Bryant 1949:459). Venda law constituted a system designed to guarantee not individual rights, but rather the rights of the family and the chiefdom itself. It broadly corresponds broadly with the Western concept of civil law and criminal law (Van Warmelo & Phophi 1948:10-11).
2. These laws usually start with 'if' and are followed by 'then'.
3. The ranking of women among the 'Southern Bantu' was important since it had major legal implications, especially for inheritance (Hammond-Tooke 1993:55).
4. Although the Book of Judges and Deuteronomy are part of the Deuteronomist's historiography (thus dating from the Exile), they probably do contain early traditions, and do reflect early conditions.