

CHAPTER NINE

The Lemba and early Israel as oral cultures

In this chapter, I demonstrate the significance of the predominantly oral nature of sources in the study of religious phenomena amongst the Lemba and in early Israel and consider what impact orality has on the study of these phenomena. An overview of the transmission of oral traditions in these two oral cultures will be followed by my brief review and evaluation of the functioning of traditions within the respective cultures. The role of oral traditions in the creation of *identity* and the influence of *change* on oral traditions as well as the effect of *inscripturation* on the shape of oral traditions will, for example, be discussed. These observations are not necessarily systematic, definitive or exhaustive; however, they do suggest areas for further investigation (cf the validity of this as suggested by De Bono 1987:37). Furthermore, these observations are cited mainly as I encountered them during the field research. Much of the actual content of the oral traditions¹ in both communities has been discussed more extensively from a social, as well as a religious, perspective in the previous chapters.

Obviously, the notion of 'oral traditions' is very wide and it should be more clearly defined and explained, since various viewpoints on and definitions of oral traditions and folklore exist, as well as possible differences between them. Thus Vansina (1985:27) defines *oral traditions* as 'verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.' He specifies that the 'message must be oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only ...' and maintains that 'this distinguishes such sources not only from written messages, but also from all other sources except oral history'. However, oral traditions can also be seen as 'the handing down of folklore from one generation to the next by word of mouth' (Deist 1984:119). *Folklore* can be defined as 'the beliefs, customs, stories and sayings of a community passed on from one generation to another' (Deist 1984:63). Two distinct facets emerge from Vansina and Deist's views, respectively. Vansina (1985:27) defines oral traditions as the *verbal messages themselves*, spoken, sung, called out and so forth, while Deist defines them as the *process or handing down of folklore* (beliefs, customs, stories, sayings and others).

For the purpose of this study, I prefer to define 'oral traditions' as that material which includes all songs, recitations, prayers, sayings, praises and any historical or cultural statements from the past, transmitted from one generation to another. The term *oral tradition*, therefore, applies to both the *process* and its *products*. Among the various kinds of historical sources, traditions occupy a significant place.

Orality among the Lemba

Transmission of tradition

General remarks

Oral cultures simply rely much less (mostly not at all) on reading and writing than do modern cultures. Most Lemba traditions are transmitted by means of songs, sermons, prayers, praises, proverbs, conversations, recitations, symbols, rituals, stories, written documents and numerous other media. *Songs, recitations and certain prayers* could be described as poems or set speech, which form part of everyday language and which are memorised. Stories and proverbs tend to be transmitted in a less fixed form, as spoken prose, whereas praise songs or poems are chanted in various kinds of recitative, employing a semi-musical framework. Performances often combine words as well as dance and thus traditions can actually be conveyed by means of these performances. One of the striking characteristics of orality over against written literature, is its *verbal variability*.

Messages which are sung ensure reliability of transmission, since the 'melody acts as a mnemonic device' (Vansina 1985:16,46; cf **Photo 29**). Lemba songs, recitations and prayers are divided into mainly two groups: (i) Those which all (even uncircumcised non-Lemba) may hear; and (ii) those which are kept secret (only known by those people who are circumcised by the Lemba). The latter are usually sung or prayed at special occasions, such as at the ritual slaughter of animals, or during the circumcision rites.

Traditions are also transmitted during festivities and other 'formal' events of the Lemba (of which many are traditional African feasts and rituals), when the Lemba's own cultural traditions are recalled. In this way these are transmitted from one generation to another.

The occasions for public performances as expressions of tradition are limited and can generally be observed only in the field. In many parts of Africa, as well as among the Lemba, these tales are usually not to be told during daytime. No definite reasons are given for this, except that the ideal setting is in the evenings, with the family sitting around the fire. Everybody, especially the children, listens intently to the old and beautiful stories of the distant past. A tale is acted out with bodily gestures and those acting will dramatise it by raising or lowering their voices. Sometimes a performer may move around, recite a part of the story and even mime parts of the action narrated. The

storytellers are usually very creative and can truly make a tale come alive. They try to frighten, to entertain and even to make their audiences worry by using different techniques. Some, of course, are more talented than others, but throughout the performance the family or the listeners interact with the storyteller. In order for it to be a success, the story needs to be well-known, which is usually the case. The audience should not be overly preoccupied by having to concentrate on the content, so that they may enjoy the tale and appreciate the creativity involved in its telling. The manner in which the tales are usually related by the reciters and the effect they can have, can be completely unforgettable. Every performance is new, but presupposes something old, the tradition itself. To a certain extent, this is the same with our sermons today – the performance is new, but it presupposes something old.



Photo 29 *Lemba men playing the Deza*

Oral traditions were the 'vehicle' through which I learned to know the Lemba. Their mode of communication has always been by means of oral traditions and the reception of these traditions always took place in this way. Unfortunately, this living source is slowly but surely disappearing and the transmission of traditions is kept alive artificially by the annual LCA (Lemba Cultural Association) Conferences. Nevertheless, these traditions are retained and affirmed by these conferences.

The role of the LCA Conferences

Apart from the routine occasions on which the Lemba convey oral traditions to the younger generation, the LCA annually initiates a special conference at Sweet Waters, Elim, in the Limpopo Province and also at other places on special occasions. The Lemba held their conference as close as possible to 10 October, which is Paul Kruger's birthday. This expressed their appreciation for the role Paul Kruger had played as President of the ZAR (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, 1884-1902) in their history, when he declared the Lemba to be 'Jews' in public. In certain sources, the Lemba are, in fact, known as 'Kruger's Jews' (cf Parfitt 1992).

In 1998 the Lemba invited a few rabbis to the annual Conference, but they could not attend since the Conference was held on the same date as *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement). As far as I know the Lemba had never held *Yom Kippur* before, but Parfitt and I, who attended that Conference together, wondered what effect this incident would have on their planning for the Conference and their own traditions in future. We thought we would not be surprised if in future, as a result of the influence of Jewish groups who want to be involved with the Lemba communities, this annual meeting will lose its 'original' connection (with Kruger) and rather be linked to the Jewish New Year, or be shifted to a more suitable date.

It was not two years later when I learned from Mathivha that the date for the Conference had been moved to a earlier date in September. He did not give a particular reason for this change, except that it suited the school children better.

During these LCA occasions every possible means of communication is used to confirm their identity and to transmit this to the next generation. At these conferences the participants are addressed as 'children of Abraham' and their 'Jewish' customs, costumes and traditions are conveyed and displayed very explicitly (cf *Photos 30; 31; 32; 33*).

Moreover, the proceedings are invariably opened by a Christian Lemba minister (usually Chaplain Mhani) with Scripture reading (usually from the Old Testament) and prayer. The gowns and Jewish caps of the Lemba leaders and the T-shirts worn by many others often bear the Star of David with their totem,² an elephant, inside. Some respondents told me that the people in the Wedza district in Zimbabwe have an elephant with a star on its forehead as a totem, because a star guided them southwards in Africa. The Lemba explain that an elephant always remembers and therefore reminds them that they should recall their history and traditions.

It appears that during the LCA Conferences, there is a conscious transferral and reinforcement of cultural identity. The Lemba narratives that are told or acted out at such occasions mainly reflect their understanding of their origin and the belief that their religio-cultural practices were transmitted by their 'Jewish' ancestors.



Photo 30 *Scene from the LCA Conferences*

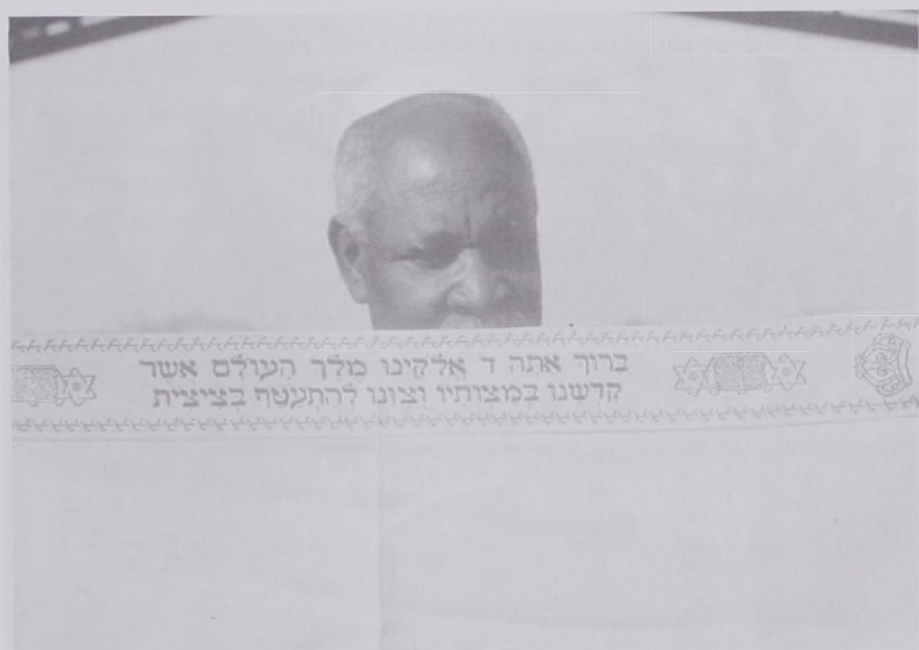


Photo 31 *Chaplain Mhani, showing his cloth at the LCA Conference*

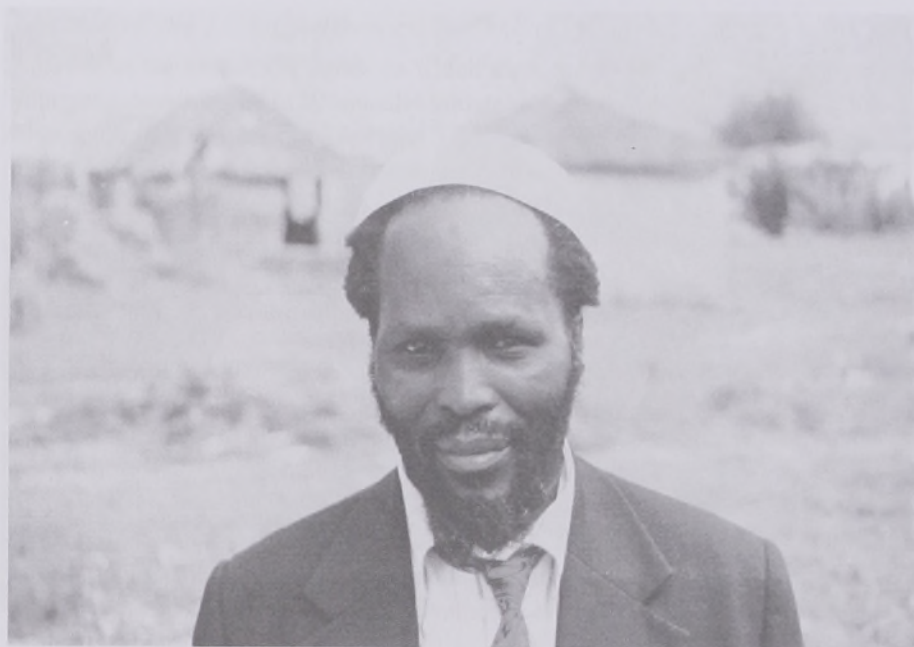


Photo 32 *Scene from the LCA Conferences*



Photo 33 *Scene from the LCA Conferences*

The functioning of oral traditions among the Lemba

Every tradition has a particular purpose and therefore fulfills a particular function, otherwise it would not survive. It is impossible to list all the possible purposes or functions that may be connected to a given tradition within the purview of this chapter. Therefore, I shall discuss only a few possible ways of functioning below.

Different and similar oral traditions within a group and between groups

A salient characteristic of my investigation into the Lemba communities is the many similar traditions and practices that can be found among different Lemba groups in Southern Africa. Some of these even correspond to those of some Jewish groups in Yemen. It is remarkable that there should be these correspondences of the *same traditions and sense of belonging, in spite of the remoteness of location and language*. Respondents from different places, from different social classes in society and even from different language groups agree regarding their initial origin in Israel and also on the many traditions surrounding their numerous practices and rituals.

The comparison of variants (gathered during the field research) shows which traditional elements have remained the same. Many different groups in Southern Africa (and some in Yemen) agree at least that:

- they came from the North, from a place called Sena, on the other side of the Phusela and that they crossed the sea by boat
- they came as traders to Africa
- they are 'children of Abraham' and the 'chosen people'
- non-Lemba people are *vhasendji* (heathen)
- they are people with special skills
- the way in which they conduct male circumcision
- traditions about female initiation ceremonies
- traditions about dietary laws
- the stories surrounding their sacred mountains and rivers
- the new moon ceremony
- their marriage customs
- slaughtering rituals
- burial customs
- different feasts
- among most of the groups one finds a strong negative reaction to the idea that they may be of Muslim origin

There are many other similarities.

That these widely scattered Lemba communities in Southern Africa have the same traditions about ancestry and practices (and even the groups in Yemen have some), cannot easily be explained and this is remarkable. There may sometimes be differences in a specific oral tradition within the same group. However, interpretations of traditions, or the stories behind a ritual, may also differ from one group to another. So the groups in the southern parts of Zimbabwe perceive the *circumcision* of males as the occasion for 'new-comers' to become *part of the Covenant with God*. Only individuals who probably earlier had contact with the groups in Zimbabwe, or who knew the Old Testament connection between circumcision and covenant, have the same interpretation or link for this tradition. However, I hardly ever gained the impression that the interviewees or respondents were trying to impress me (or anyone else) with the information they gained from the Bible. Thus they may not have been influenced by their knowledge of the Bible.



Photo 34 The High priest Zvinowanda in Mberengwa (left) and interpreter Bishop Marinda (of Zirrcon)

It is primarily *the leaders* within the various communities, such as the high priest in Mberengwa (cf **Photo 34**) and Mathivha (president of the LCA), who emphasise the connection between the Covenant and male circumcision. In the past Mathivha often had contact with the groups in Zimbabwe and could possibly have come to know this

emphasis during his first visits to this area. It might also be that the traditions *have not yet reached all the clans* and therefore they do not yet share the same frame of reference. However, the principle or motif behind the Covenant relationship, namely that they are a chosen people with special skills, is also present in all other Lemba groups. More complete information concerning circumcision will still be disseminated to other groups by means of their leaders, by the written word, or even by a church (especially the African Independent or Initiated Churches), which places strong emphasis on the customs and traditions of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, *not everyone* necessarily accepts new elements which are added to old, existing traditions from outside their clan. They do take cognisance of new information, but in more than one case the respondent merely kept to that which had been transmitted to him/her in his/her specific group. So most respondents say they came from Israel, but some individuals say they came from Egypt, Ethiopia or Arabia.

Similarly only individuals (e.g. the traditional healer in Sekhukhuneland) propagate female circumcision (by means of an operation). Other individuals, again, maintain that they always kept a day of fasting, or a day of rest, specifically called the Sabbath. The groups in the former Venda and Sekhukhuneland do not have the same understanding and memory of the role that the *ngoma lungundu* ('the drum that thunders') played in their history, as have the groups in the southern parts of Zimbabwe (cf **Photo 35**).



Photo 35 Representatives from Zimbabwe at a LCA Conference

The question remains: Why do different groups and sometimes members of the same group, differ in certain aspects of a tradition and conversely, why do they sometimes concur on other traditions? To answer this question, Vansina (1985:55) surmises that it may help to inquire into the *sources* of the authors' traditions. He asserts that if these sources are still alive, one can inquire from them about other versions of the same traditions. With the present Lemba people as a living source, one is to some extent fortunate that one can still verify some of their traditions. However, in most cases, I gathered that the respondents simply received their stories from their parents or grandparents. A respondent would not speak if a parent, grandparent or even an elder brother or sister were still alive and if they could speak on behalf of the extended family. Most of the time I found that the versions recounted by the extended family were exactly the same as those of their descendants. I did many random inquiries during the field work, from individuals, some independent, younger and older, from the same and different communities. However, very few significant differences were detected.

The answer to the differences in tradition probably lies in the Lemba comprising different clans which each had its own historical and genealogical background. The traditions of each clan play a unique role in their identity formation and yet they were all known as the Lemba.

In the course of time, if the Lemba manage to obtain their own territory or homeland somewhere in Southern Africa, they will consolidate and their few differences will fade and they will perhaps be 'one' religious and cultural entity (see below).

Oral traditions, the expression of a world-view and the creation of identity

Often the ideal to which members of a group have to conform is preserved in their oral traditions, which mirror their society and express their world-views. People in a community share many representations (of their world-view) which are collective and dear to them and which differ from others. Therefore, traditions often provide a mechanism for leaders whereby the ability to exert a hold and establish control over a community or traditions could be used as a justification for existing traditions.

In more than one instance, *charismatic leaders exert a major influence* over a community. It is therefore significant to realise that most of the Lemba in the southern parts of Zimbabwe and many in Sekhukhuneland, know Mathivha, nor have they ever attended the LCA Conferences. In fact, few respondents neither have read Mathivha's book on their traditions. Obviously, those who attend the LCA Conferences are being exposed to information from different sources. It is this what gives the concurring traditions in the different communities so much more credibility, since it implies that not everything written down or said by the leaders has necessarily reached a scattered group such as the Lemba.

It once again becomes clear that traditions bind people together and play an immense role in the *creation of identity*. All the Lemba songs, recitations and myths are not merely to entertain the listeners, but also give them a sense of belonging, since they have a rhetorical function and may contribute to the reproduction of the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies of a group as a whole. Mumby (1993:125) agrees that these traditions reinforce their values and give them a vision of their origin and hope for the future. Writing about identity and religion has repeatedly stressed particularly that those traditions with a religious inclination are more effective in preserving identity.

Without doubt, the Lemba believe that they are unique and have special qualities and skills which their neighbours may envy. This strong sense of 'ethnic otherness' possibly attracted the Lemba to Judaism and more specifically to the Old Testament and *reinforced ancient traditions* and customs, since Judaism represents an exclusivity which entirely correlates with the view the Lemba have of themselves.

The fact that some of the Lemba have been exposed to the Bible and its narratives, or may have read the written records of their customs and traditions, has certainly strengthened their traditions and sense of uniqueness. In other instances they were estranged from their own 'sinful' culture by the influence and interpretations of certain missionaries.

Especially when the account of their origin is the only remaining evidence for a common identity or when groups feel *threatened by complete assimilation*, then it seems to be that the emphasis in the narratives on their common ancestry is a cohesive factor.

Inscription of oral traditions

To a certain extent, the reinforcement and confirmation of the identity of the Lemba were consolidated when their traditions were written down by some of their leaders and other observers. Except for the short notes and articles of Lemba authors such as Mphelo (1936), Mudau (1940), Mamadi (1940), Motenda-Mbelengwa (1958), Marole (1969), Moeti (1989) and others, Mathivha (1992) was the first to have put into writing all the possible oral traditions of their culture. To me it is remarkable that so many Lemba, from an originally oral culture, already have put so many of their traditions into writing.

After my field research was undertaken, I read Mathivha's book (for the first time) and some of the other authors' articles. Soon I realised that the stories of the people at grass roots level sometimes *differ from those which are written down*. One often finds an author's own elaborations and editing of the beliefs of the people. This may not have been done on purpose, but happened when the authors wrote down one side of a story, whereas there may be more than one way to interpret certain aspects of their beliefs.

The traditions that are written down are not necessarily the oldest or the closest to the 'original' practice, even if that could have been established. An opinion is often only one person's opinion or one clan's interpretation or perception of a specific event or practice. The same bias or limitation is obviously true of the present writing by me.

Furthermore, it became clear that traditions, once written down, were exposed to the world-view and editing of the redactor or writer, which then became fossilised. Niditch (1996:44) aptly reminds us of the truism that 'a person leaves traces of himself in his writing.' However, if it were not for the reports of the Arabian and Portuguese seafarers, the ethnographers, missionaries, the Lemba themselves, as well as those matters recorded by others, many of their oral traditions would have been lost.

Indubitably, *oral traditions were never intended to be written down* or to be deposited in writing. By themselves oral traditions have the function or the nature of being adaptable and have the potential for repeated innovation. Although this might be true, it might also happen that a written work may be 're-oralised', or made the core of a new orally created work, especially when the conveyer has received new information or has something he or she wants to add. Mathivha (1998), for example, simply added the information about the current genetic research being done, which correlates remarkably with the story on the Buba clan he had already written down years ago (1992:9). Oral culture does not die once reading and writing are available. The *oral culture* of the Lemba *continues* even though literacy has become more common.

Another inference that can be drawn, is that the *written text has had little influence* on the people at grass roots level so far (as already mentioned above). Most interviews were conducted with people who had not yet read the book or articles by fellow Lemba, or with people who had not yet attended any LCA Conferences. I have also found that many of the respondents did not necessarily concur with the stories or interpretations of the leaders at the conferences. In fact, many of them stubbornly cling to that which was transmitted by their direct forebears. They will take cognisance of what others may have said, but that is not the way it was transmitted to them. I have often witnessed how a person or persons would patiently listen to another's narrative or story without arguing or indicating that they did not agree and would then in their turn give a completely different interpretation or version of the same story or tell a completely different story altogether. This may mean that they do not necessarily think that another person's version is wrong but that it is just different.

The saying 'once we had a book because we were a holy people....', could allude to the impression that some of the ancestors of the Lemba were familiar with reading (and writing) long ago, even before colonisation in Africa took place. Although there is no proof of such a 'book', this book could greatly have influenced their oral traditions, their view of God and self-identity.

One of the main reasons, as far as I can judge, why the Lemba started writing down their oral traditions is perhaps that they became aware that they and their customs are unique and that they felt threatened by complete assimilation by other peoples. Mathivha and other scholars before him, were concerned about this 'enemy' from within – that their traditions of origin and other special customs would not be preserved for their descendants.

Changes in oral traditions at different times

One of the main characteristics of oral traditions is their *malleability*; therefore one might for instance find that a significant historical perspective could originate from an existing political situation. In this way oral traditions reflect a group's world-views, values, sense of identity and ideology. A group may often revert to their *oral traditions* as a resource during a phase of renewal or change. The accounts by Mahumane in 1728 (Liesegang 1977) show that from the early eighteenth to the second half of the nineteenth centuries cultural and political changes occurred which influenced the Lemba's self-identification.

Parfitt (1995) maintained that the Lemba possibly made a religious shift towards 'Jewishness' under the oppressive political system of the British in the former Rhodesia. However, in the meantime the results of the genetic tests may have changed his mind regarding a religious shift of the Lemba to some extent. Yet the possibility may still exist that the Lemba, at the time of British oppression, could have fallen back on ancient traditions and customs, or that these may have been strengthened in the process.

As far as can be determined the Lemba had no specific tradition of a 'promised land' in Africa and they may have adapted their tradition to this. However, they believed that Mwari led them very specifically by means of a star to Southern Africa and the various places where they had to live. From here they dispersed in different groups and over great distances.

It is interesting that they have tried for the last few years at government level to negotiate for themselves their own territory in the new South Africa. They especially claim the area in the vicinity of the mission station at Mara (Limpopo Province), where many Lemba still dwell and where there is mention of holy places. Whether this is feasible under the notion of the so-called 'rainbow nation' for the New South Africa, still needs to be seen.

The political situation in South Africa in the past forty to fifty years actually provided the Lemba with a unique opportunity to consolidate their own homeland (with the right to self determination). However, for various reasons they did not claim this right. After the 1994 elections, it came to light that many of the Lemba did not consider it to be politically correct to disclose their possible link to a race with a white identity some-

where outside Africa. Rather, they kept quiet about it. In this way there was no mention of their own unique identity during the census and they existed as Sothos, Vendas or whoever. In other words, current politics did 'change' and influence their oral tradition, or at least kept them from living out or conveying their traditions to the full.

A fusion of traditions

It is possible that traditions could have been mixed as far as the origin and other traditions of the Lemba are concerned. Oral traditions *do not provide* a chronology and therefore hundreds or even thousands of years could have elapsed between the oldest historical core of a tradition and the next oldest. When they tell their stories there is no notion that time has elapsed. For example, the oldest historical nucleus is probably that they came to this continent from a very remote place on the other side of the Phusela. However, the time when they lived among the Banyai could have been hundreds of years later.

Another example of this possible assimilation of traditions is that which Marole recorded about the Vhasia, who were known for their beautiful girls. The same is also said about the Lemba, that they were known for their beautiful girls. A specific praise song emphasises: '*Mbelengwa has beauties*' (Marole 1969:4). Do we have a mixture of different traditions to which the Lemba adapted? Or did both groups have beautiful girls? We do not know.

Oral traditions, archaeology and genetics

Archaeology and other groups' traditions

One advantage of dealing with (or doing research on) a 'living source' is that the researcher can sometimes verify some of the information on traditions provided. Remarkable confirmation of some names and places referred to in the traditions of the Lemba is, for example, found by different researchers (most were referred to earlier)

- (i) The Lemba aver that they came from a city on the other side of the Phusela, called *Sena*. Parfitt claims to have found an ancient city named *Sena*, at the end of the *wadi* Hadramaut, just before the valley turns away towards the sea. It was situated on the trade route, from the sea to Terim (see *Map I*).
- (ii) The valley that leads from *Sena* in the eastern Hadramaut (in Yemen) to an old port on the Yemeni coast called *Sayhut*, is the *Wadi al-Masilah*. Parfitt (1997:336; cf *Map I*) believes that *Masilah* may be the 'Phusela' of Lemba oral tradition.
- (iii) It is furthermore remarkable that some of the clan and sub-clan names of the Lemba correlate with commonplace names (Hadrami names) in the eastern Hadramaut.

Not one of them had the means to ascertain in advance, whether their clan names correlated with the commonplace names in the Hadramaut. One conclusion is that their *oral traditions are very old*. Obviously, it took more than just two or three generations to have migrated from Yemen to Southern Africa. All this implies that an oral tradition can *survive many generations* within a group.

- (iv) The Lemba tradition is perpetuated, namely that they rebuilt the city of *Sena* in Africa on the Zambezi, which has also been located by many scholars, who traced their trail from Southern Africa northwards to their 'vanished city' (as Parfitt calls it, 1997:336).
- (v) One of the praises of the Lemba refers to the Hadzi-Mberengwa clan as the 'Good Men' and to Mberengwa Mountain as the 'mountain of the Good Men'. Parfitt was similarly amazed to find an area (on an old map) that had indeed been named by Vasco da Gama as 'the Land of the Good People' – *Terra da Boa Gente*, not far from Sena on the Zambezi, in the vicinity of Cape Correntes (cf *Map II*).
- (vi) According to the *folklore* of the Yemenite Jews, their ancient forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen, exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple. This is again in concurrence with the above mentioned tradition of the origin of the Lemba.
- (vii) Islamic and Christian inscriptions, as well as *inscriptions* written in the Himyarite language, bear witness to a Jewish presence in Yemen during the centuries immediately preceding Islam.
- (viii) Another *tradition* in Yemen propagates the belief that centuries ago a group of Jews left Yemen for Africa and did not return.
- (ix) Interestingly, Nehemiah 7 refers to all the different groups of Israelites who returned to Israel after the Exile. Verse 38 specifically mentions the return of the 'children of Sénaä'. Where was this place and who were these people?
- (x) One should consider the possibility that some of the children of Sénaä escaped the exile by fleeing into the Arabian Peninsula, such as indicated on *inscriptions* found in Israel (Niditch 1996:47-48).
- (xi) I was amazed to learn about a place called 'Lemba' (in Moab) on an ancient map (cf *Map III*, Aharoni & Avi-Yonah 1974: Map 213). According to historical sources, Judaism was imposed on the cities in ancient Moab by Alexander Jannaeus. Whether this city has anything to do with the Lemba here in Southern Africa, one would never know. I recall that a Lemba in Soweto once told Parfitt that his grandparents had told him that they originally had come from a city, 'somewhere south of Jericho'.

Genetics

To summarise: in 1992, a study using Y-chromosome markers suggested both a Bantu and a *Semitic* contribution to the Lemba gene pool (Spurdle and Jenkins). In 1996, Jones,³ referring to the genetic results at that stage, had already concluded: 'The Lemba legend of their origin contains a hidden truth'. But this was not yet the end of the story. In 2000 (:669) Thomas (et al) went even further by adding that the 'CMH [Cohen Modal Haplotype] present in the Lemba could, however, have an *exclusively Judaic* origin ...'

To conclude, one could say that the archaeological, genetic and other evidence in the results reported above, which '[involve] an origin in a "Jewish" population outside Africa, male mediated gene flow from other Semitic immigrants and admixture with Bantu neighbours' is in more than one way compatible with the Lemba oral traditions and history, Thomas et al, 2000:669).

Orality among early Israel

Many modern scholars still admit a discomfort in associating folklore or oral traditions with the Bible (cf Gunkel 1987:33; Zakovitch 1990/1:235), although the work of others such as Culley, Sasson, Niditch and Hendel has gained new acceptance among contemporary Bible scholars. The point of departure for the acceptance of orality, is that the 'Old Testament is a creation of the post-Exilic Jewish community; of what existed earlier undoubtedly only a small part was in fixed written form ...' (Nyberg 1935:8, in Nielsen 1961:39). From this perspective the specific parts of the Old Testament, which originated or had their origin in early Israel, were given their own place in history.

Gottwald (1985:94-96) surmises that the oral traditions formed part of the historical consciousness of Israelite clans, as early as 1200 BCE, although they could only be traced historically as far back as the existence of 'Israel' as a 'national' entity, that is, only after settlement in the land in other words, during 'the period of the Judges'. The Exodus group could obviously already have been fostering their ideas and traditions, but most of the oral traditions which functioned in early Israel were only finally written down five hundred or more years *after* these events. Thus the *distance in time* complicates ascertaining the *historicity* of the traditions. Nevertheless, it is a fixed datum that no oral tradition has been 'preserved' to this day – the reworked, written sources and material remains are all that we have to work with (Lemche 1988:55). Only a few traditions or fragments of these, could possibly have remained orally, if they were not recorded in writing very early.

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

Transmitting traditions

General remarks

It appears from available data in the Old Testament as if traditions in early Israel were transmitted from one generation to another by means of sermons, prayers, praises, proverbs, recitations, fables and other forms of cultural expression. Two of the oldest sections in the Hebrew Bible are songs (cf, e.g., the Song of Miriam in Ex 15; and the Song of Deborah in Jdg 5); incidentally both of these were 'created' by women. Both of these deal with the early history of Israel and in both the great deeds of Yāhweh are sung. Although inscripturated, they most probably had had an oral phase.

The oral traditions handed down from one person or group to another, were *still in a state of flux*. In other words, what was handed down was not identical to what they originally received. The personal faith of each individual added to his or her own perspective (on the tradition transmitted), since their current faith was greater than its history. As in other pre-industrial cultures, each version should perhaps be seen as a different 'performance' (Niditch 1987:23), keeping in mind the possible authors and audiences to whom and for whom, each narration of the tale would have been relevant and meaningful. These different versions or parallels of the same narrative often occur on the pages of the Old Testament and should be interpreted as such. Precisely how traditions were transmitted and during which occasions, is not certain, but we may be able to learn from other existing 'oral cultures' how this process may have taken place.

The influence of assemblies at the sanctuaries

The typical location where clans would have had the opportunity to exchange their traditions, was at the sanctuaries (such as Shechem and others; cf Jdg 4:6, 12, 14; Jos 24) although not all clans or people might have attended those meetings. The clans of Israel had many festive occasions during which they met. Not all of these were linked to religious events, but they nevertheless had a religious character and took place at the sanctuary. It is not certain if these festivities only took place sporadically, or whether there were fixed religious feast days. Two important liturgical calendars are found in the Old Testament – in Exodus 23:14-17 and in 34:18-23, which refer to three great annual feasts of the Canaanites, which were taken over by the Israelites, namely the feast of the Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of the Harvest.

The clans who met in this way and who more or less shared the same idea about God, were probably the 'people of the patriarchs' who lived in Canaan and who worshipped the *God of the fathers* (or, at that stage, *El* worshippers). In addition, there could have been the Joseph people, who also served the *God of the fathers* and shared the traditions of the miraculous deliverance from Egypt by Yāhweh. Furthermore, there were the Moses people, with their specific tradition of Sinai and their notion of the *only God*,

who had to be served and honoured, according to his stipulations (cf Deist 1985:33). At the sanctuaries and other places of gathering, much moulding of traditions probably took place and these were adapted to suit the faith needs of the people.

Thus it was at the sanctuaries that the clans joined in the Canaanite agricultural feasts, probably during their worship of Baal as the god of fertility. Here they also felt the need and desire to proclaim and sing about the redemptive acts of Yahweh and other traditions.

The functioning of oral traditions

Different and similar oral traditions within a group and between groups

It may be accepted that there were a number of clans in early Israel who were related and who shared the same idea about Yahweh and his great deeds of the past. It may also be accepted that the 'people of the patriarchs', the Joseph people and the Moses people all had their own and unique religious traditions. Noth also identifies a number of traditions which could have served as a historical basis for the clans of Israel, such as:

- the deliverance from Egypt and the slavery when building the cities of Pithom and Raamses
- the entry of certain Israelite clans from the Southern Transjordanian region
- the narratives concerning the patriarchs and
- Moses, as well as meeting God at Sinai

These narratives were probably the oldest traditions which were in circulation in early Israel. A number of clans or tribes possessed more than one of these traditions, which eventually became the possession of all Israel, probably because they became written down in the process.

The traditions of the various clans differed from each other but nevertheless agreed in certain respects. The chronological arrangement of the various narratives in the Old Testament was probably the work of later authors. Their respective understandings of God and their past had to be brought in line with those of other groups and thus the respective traditions also influenced one another. This does not imply that all the clans all of a sudden came to accept the others, but that there was some kind of evolutionary process. It may have been that some of the clans lived in different geographical locations in those early days and did not want to accept the other clans' traditions. Perhaps some clung only to that which was conveyed to them and to others, acceptance of different traditions was easier. Nevertheless, it can be accepted that there was a cross-fecundation of the different traditions.

It could have been difficult for the people of the patriarchs to accept that Yahweh demanded at Sinai that He *alone* should be served, since they were probably quite used

to the polytheism of the Canaanites. Another example of the diversity that become one unified belief system is that the making of the Covenant was not part of all the clans' experience, but eventually this became part of the tradition of the entire nation of Israel (cf Hab 3:3; Ps 68 et al).

Oral traditions, the expression of a world-view and the creation of identity

Oral traditions reflect Israelite world-views, values, sense of identity and ideology. 'World-view' includes the symbolic patterns which are acted out in ritual performance, retold in stories and encapsulated in proverbs or parables. World-views, reflected in traditions, provide answers to some of the difficult questions human beings have to deal with.

However, variations in world-views occur even among people who understand themselves to be part of the same religious tradition (Smart 1983). Variations and nuances imbue Israel's world-view, which is clear from the different ways in which God is perceived in the oral traditions. God is seen by some clans as the Deliverer who brought them out of slavery: no images should be made of him and his name is not to be used inappropriately. The Covenant, in some other clans' world-view, is a manifestation of a relationship between Israel and God, with specific obligations for both partners. These rights and obligations are also reflected in violent manifestations of the divine (e.g. at Sinai). Other examples that form an integral part of early Israel's world-view are the ideas that *mountains* are the dwelling place of the divine, that one should take care of one's kin and that hospitality is of the utmost importance.

Leaders obviously also played a great role in the expression and transmission of a particular world-view or identity. In Joshua 24, Joshua places the nation before the decision to choose whom they want to serve in future. He then announces that he and his house will henceforth serve the Lord of the Covenant. From this it may be inferred that different groups of people were not all of the same mind. All traditions also did not necessarily reach all the clans at the same time, since they lived over a wide area. During the occasion at Shechem, a renewal festival, the people celebrated the Covenant, presented its stipulations, exchanged traditions and some elements were added to the various 'world-views'. However, a leader such as Joshua frequently hears the God of the Covenant saying: 'Kill and destroy'. This contributes to the idea of Yahweh being a God of war, who acts with military might to ensure the Israelites' victory over their enemies. Kripke (1980:114) points out that there are two conditions necessary to maintain the identity of a name: the continuity of its history, as well as the fixed origin to which it is linked by this continuous history.

Oral traditions probably obtained a prominent place in the clans of Israel, because it was important to *confirm their identity and uniqueness*, in the midst of a multiplicity of other nations who also laid claims to the same land. Questions concerning their self-identification are answered when they refer to their covenant relationship with God and the tradition that they are his special 'chosen people'. *Creation stories similarly reinforce identity* in times of uncertainty. Creation mythology offers a sense of shared identity. More than one story describes the primordial roots of how life began (Gn 2).

Inscription of oral traditions

Gottwald (1985:94) and others accept that most Biblical literature had a complex and deep seated oral tradition. That is, before anything was written, there were already oral traditions which were transmitted from generation to generation. The question is whether any oral traditions from early Israel were written down in that period or not and this question is obviously related to whether there was a mastery of writing in early Israel or not.

It is quite generally accepted that the alphabet was developed by the Canaanites and Phoenicians and that it was already developed in the period of the Judges (Ap-Thomas 1973; antecedents in Mesopotamia). This development can probably be related to the continuous correspondence (in Accadian cuneiform writing) which took place between the Canaanite kings and the Egyptian rulers. Demsky (1977:21) is of the opinion that the need to write down Canaanite language and literature existed. Some of these Canaanite authors experimented a little with cuneiform in their correspondence with the Egyptians.

An indication that the art of writing was practised in early Israel is the reference to the official from Succoth who was able to provide Joshua, in writing, with seventy seven names of officials and leaders from that area (Jdg 8:14). Demsky (1977:24) emphasises that the official from Succoth was not an Israelite, but that a leader such as Gideon possibly realised the value of the art of writing as it was practised amongst the Canaanites. He surmises that the Israelites began their own schools for writing for administrative purposes, in the region of the Joseph tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

In addition (according to Demsky), the Song of Deborah (Jdg 5) which is invariably linked to the period of the Judges, again confirms possible literacy among the Israelite clans (5:14): 'From Machir commanders come down, and from Zebulun those who wield the *staff of office*.' Demsky (1977:23 n 21) translates 'staff of office' by 'the scribe's staff', but acknowledges that the interpretation of 'staff of office' is not without problems. He further refers to the important discovery made at 'Izbet Sartah (Aphek). According to him, the oldest, most complete proto-Canaanite 'abecedary' (alphabet), from the 12th century before Christ, was discovered here.

It is thus likely that some (possibly the elite) of the Israelite clans in the period of the Judges could read and write – especially the group who dwelt for a long time in the land among the Canaanites or who came from Canaanite circles. Joshua 18:8,9 refers to ‘writing up’ a description of the land and its cities. Moses is said to have written down the Israelites’ itinerary by command of the Lord in Numbers 33:2. Niditch (1996:94) states that the reference to a written source is used to validate the tradition – to imply that this really is the way things were.

It is not that ancient Israelites knew little of writing, but rather that Israelite literacy is not to be confused with modern literacy and that ancient Israelite literacy has to be understood in the context of an oral-traditional culture. This implies that ‘doorway writing’ or ‘body writing’ (Dt 6:4-9) could be metonymic and symbolic, a means of reminding one who sees (or wears) the writing about God’s larger demands – the essentials of Israelite religion.

As far as the inscriptionation of oral traditions is concerned the Book of Judges witnesses a long period of development during which it can be supposed that several editors were at work. Since the book was only compiled about five hundred years after the events (for the first time as part of the Deuteronomistic History) it appears to be rigorously edited material. The original text was apparently reworked more than once to suit the purposes of the editors. It appears that the writer or writers of the text among other matters knew about the patriarchs, the Exodus and the settlement of the land. Whether, and if so which, traditions were already written in early Israel or earlier, is a tenuous guess, but examples of these are possibly (i) the oldest narratives about the persons of the judges, (ii) the victory song of Deborah (Jdg 4 and 5) and (iii) other material which shows nomadic features.

Richter (1964:113-141) identifies sections in the present Book of Judges, which he argues, were originally part of the so-called *Rettersbuch* (Saviour’s Book). He refers to the narratives of Ehud (Jdg 3:15b-26, the only part that was probably transmitted in its original form); Jael (4:17a, 18-21[22]), as well as to the sections about the Gideon traditions (Judges 7:11b, 13-21; 8:5-9, 14-21a), with 9:56 as the conclusion. Richter surmises that these narratives were possibly the oldest texts, or the first edition, of which there were later expansions. But even these narratives were firstly narrated orally (probably already during the times of the Judges), before they were written down. The majority of scholars (cf Noth [1958]1983; Manley 1988; Herrmann 1981; Jagersma 1982; Schmidt 1983) accept the historicity of the traditions, without accepting the present chronology or factual correctness.

Gordon (1985:124) is convinced that the earliest inscriptionations of the victories of the Israelites were probably described in the ‘Book of the Wars of the LORD (Yahweh)’ (Nm 21:14) – this book no longer exists. He is further of the opinion that some of the ancient war cries were preserved in Numbers 10 and Judges 7:18.

From the much later Targums (200 BCE) we know that ancient translators thought themselves to be part of the living tradition and therefore, felt free to change and adapt their source texts (Swanepoel 1994). It is clear that they did not share, with modern Bible readers, the idea of a 'fixed' or 'final' text. In this sense they were *performers rather than translators*: Larger and smaller variations in a story could occur instantaneously. It is also clear that not all stories or traditions were written down. In other words it was left to the authors to write down or omit what they felt inspired to do. This is the text that we have today. Nevertheless, a reinforcement of their identity probably took place when their traditions were written down.

Changing oral traditions at different times

Narratives are the mechanisms which can solve a current problem. These problems often move people to make a 'religious shift', or they may cause them to *re-live or confirm* traditions about origins. Mumby (1993:1-11) explains this phenomenon: '[W]e need our myths and stories, but these stories are not fixed. They change as time changes. Stories help us to control our environment – a form of social control.'

Oral traditions were possibly the cohering factor in early Israel, but they also fulfilled a need or had a political function at various times, namely to justify (in times of uncertainty) claims to the land. This was especially true at the beginning when Israelites were establishing themselves in the 'Promised Land', then again later during the Exile – and is so even today. It was probably much later, during times of 'cultural diffusion', that most of the early traditions of the origin of Israel were written down. They felt confused and threatened during their Babylonian captivity, being confronted with all the creation stories and stories about the beginning of all things. Therefore, some of the traditions can be described as sacred, imbued with a political tenor. Furthermore, each of the traditions mentioned above also obtained cultic significance, since the clans linked the one or other cultic activity or confession to it.

Many different circumstances might change a particular tradition. For example the version of the conquest of the 'Promised Land' by the Israelite clans is one of a *military conquest* (Jos 1-12), while the first chapter of Judges reflects a totally different story. According to that version the Israelites *could not invade* most of the Canaanite city-states as narrated in Joshua 1-12 and perhaps infiltrated these cities in a more gradual way. One view is not necessarily right and the other wrong, but these are probably different versions, with a different performance from another perspective and perhaps for another audience.

Different versions of the same narrative (hidden oral tradition) often occur on the pages of the Old Testament. The so-called wife-sister stratagem in Genesis 12, 20 and 26 reflects something of the world-view of the patriarchs. Each version could be seen as a different performance that was written down at some stage, but they could similarly

have been the inventions of the authors who wrote them down, using them for different situations or purposes (Gn 16:6-14; 21; 1 Ki 19:4-8).

A fusion of traditions

Schmidt (1983:116; used by Deist [1985:34] and others) is convinced that especially Shechem, but also other sanctuaries in the 'rural' areas, such as Tabor (Jos 19:22,23; Jdg 4:6,12,14), Bethel (Jdg 20:26; 1 Sm 7:16), Hebron-Mamre (2 Sm 2:1-4), Beersheba (Am 5:5; 8:14), Mishpa (Jdg 20:1, 3; 1 Sm 7:5-12,16), Gilgal (Jos 3; 1 Sm 10:8; 13:4) and Shiloh (Jdg 9:26-27 and cf 21:19; 1 Sm 1:3) were the crucible where traditions were melted together. It was probably at these locations where self-critical questions were asked, traditions were adjusted and adaptations made.

For instance, the Sinai tradition propagated the view that Yahweh, the God of War, was the only God, this over against the polytheism of the dwellers of Canaan. Yahweh's mercy, even his jurisprudence, became more and more prominent. It was actually the justice and the mercy of Yahweh that made the world-view of the Israelites so unique. They also had to adapt to the notion that Yahweh was *one* God (cf Dt 32:8-9); thus, there was only one God and that God was Yahweh. Besides the self-critical correction and the adaptations made from Yahwism, these beliefs had to exist in an environment of polytheism. Yahwism therefore had to take up a position against the Canaanite religions. However, eventually certain characteristics of Baal and other gods fused with those of Yahweh, while other characteristics were avoided. In other words, more than one tradition became intertwined over a span of time and thus a new and richer view of God originated.

Eventually the central traditions gained the most prominence and these became the traditions that were written down and were transmitted to posterity.

Oral traditions, archaeology and other sources

Archaeology

Archaeology confirms that not everything that happened or exactly how it happened was written down. Archaeological evidence about the 'entry' into the Promised Land, to mention just one example, contradicts the forceful takeover described in the Book of Joshua, whereas the very scant information in Judges 1 is more pertinently confirmed by what has been disclosed by archaeology up to the present (cf Dever 1990). This opens up the possibility that the tradition of a forceful takeover during the inscripturation of oral traditions (i.e. at a time of political threat), was a *central tradition* that gained the greatest prominence at that time and *was written down* for this reason. Some suggest that only one group, probably the clan of Benjamin, could have entered the land by force.

Extra-biblical sources

A number of extra-biblical sources, in one way or another, refer to Hebrew groups who were slaves in Egypt or even refer to the God of the Israelites in the South. It is Noth's ([1958]1983:112-115) view that the original report to Pharaoh Seti II, by an Egyptian border official (ca 1205 BCE), recorded in the Anastasi Papyrus (ANET:259), is preserved in Exodus 14:5a: 'When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled....' Historically, one may infer from this only that the Israelites 'fled' from Egypt without the knowledge of the Egyptians (i.e. at the time of Pharaoh Raamses II – 1290-1223 BCE). Noth, furthermore, believes that the earliest deposit of these events is contained in the so-called 'Song of Moses' (actually of course the 'Song of Miriam'): 'He [Yahweh] cast the horse and its rider into the sea' (Ex 15:4; Noth [1958]1983:112-114).

Egyptian 'Shasu-texts' from the time of Amenhotep III (first half of the fourteenth century) and Raamses II (thirteenth century), even refer to Yahweh in the 'Land of the Shasu', that was probably in the vicinity of Seir (in the vicinity of Edom). Albertz (1994:51) concludes: 'We cannot rule out the possibility that this could have something to do with the worship of a god of the same name in this region.'

The sources above are mere fragments which possibly reflect something of the historicity of the oral traditions of the early Israelites.

Evaluation

The functioning of oral traditions, as experienced in the oral culture of the Lemba, served as my guideline for the framework of this chapter and for how one could possibly apply this to early Israel. Certain observations can no longer be made regarding early Israel and many questions can no longer be asked, but in my opinion the Lemba as a 'living source' can teach us much about orality of traditions.

My research among the Lemba illustrated and indicated *a diversity and a unity* within the same group. A group sense and the same traditions can exist, *in spite of geographical distance and language differences*, almost like the European Jews, who were universally dispersed, far away from present-day Israel. Widely scattered Lemba communities in Southern Africa and Yemenite Jews, who hardly had contact with each other and did not even know of one another's existence, reflect remarkable similarity in their concept of their ancestry. This could point to at least some 'authentic' Jewish influence in the past (before their Diaspora; perhaps before 600 CE) which has been preserved in their oral traditions. Similar research can, unfortunately, no longer be conducted among the various tribes of early Israel, but there are traces of a similar feeling of unity and similarity of traditions, in spite of distance and other differences which are reflected in the pages of the Old Testament.

However, the historical claims of the Lemba that they are Israelites cannot be proven either way, since there are also many traditions in the Old Testament that are not found among the Lemba. This could mean that their narratives about origins are not completely recorded and that we have a limited image of these origins. It is clear from the inscription of both the Lemba and early Israel's oral traditions, as well as archaeological, genetic and other evidence, that *not everything was written down*. This implies that many of the oral traditions of the Israelites could also have been lost during 500 years or more and the distance in time complicates the historicity of the traditions.

Oral traditions do not provide us with chronology and therefore, it should be kept in mind that a *fusion of traditions* could have taken place and that hundreds or even thousands of years could have elapsed between the oldest historical core of a tradition and the next phase. The possibility that within a group an oral tradition could *survive many generations*, also came to light. In the case of the Lemba this notion is strengthened by archaeological and genetic findings, but also by the narratives of other relevant groups, who were not even aware of each other's existence. This conclusion has decisive implications for the late dating of the Old Testament by some scholars.

Leaders play an extremely important role in the functioning of oral traditions. Mathivha (and others before him), like a Joshua of old, 'called together' the clans at the LCA Conferences, in order to exchange traditions and customs, to strengthen these similarities and to add information where there is anything lacking. As at Shechem (Jos 24), a measure of assimilation of traditions took place and newer and richer ideas about God and traditions emerged, but not all these traditions reached every clan and not everybody in an oral culture necessarily accepts new elements. This means that the stories of the people at grass root level could differ from those central traditions written down by the leaders or writers. It could also imply that different traditions or versions of a tradition could be found within the same group.

One should seriously consider that the oral phase encapsulated in many sections of the Old Testament is much more important for the understanding of the character and essence of certain sections of the Old Testament than the later written phase. Oral traditions which were handed down were fluid and were *not supposed to be in 'fixed' form*. Literacy in the earlier Lemba communities and that of early Israel also has to be understood in the context of an orality-of-tradition culture.

Certain aspects of the Old Testament *world-view* are fundamentally shared in symbols, narratives and rites that determine the identity of Israel over the ages (this is clearly preserved from the OT world-view). However, within these parameters great variation of Israelite identity is possible – this includes changes during a long period of time and even differences within a similar period. Most important here is that the Israelite society was very complex and evolved over hundreds of years. In both cases there were differences and different groups and many differences in identity. This is reflected in the great variety of 'voices' in the Old Testament.

The role which oral traditions play in the expression of a *world-view* and in the *creation of identity* should never be underestimated. Most scholars agree that oral traditions are 'documents' of the present, because they are related to the present. However, traditions should always be understood as reflecting both past and present in one single sweep – people reach back into the past to create both the present and a future for themselves.

The comparisons in this chapter have confirmed that the themes of the role and function of oral traditions offer important angles of approach for the understanding of the Old Testament and in Africa.

NOTES

1. In this project, oral traditions which were obtained from the Lemba by means of recorded performances, interviews and others means during the field work, were translated directly by an interpreter from the original language into English, while they were being taped. Thereafter they were transcribed and documented. As far as possible the actual words of the participants were retained in the transcription.
2. Deist (1984:175) defines a totem as 'the creature or object venerated in totemism' and totemism as 'the belief that some animal, plant or other natural object is a benefactor of one's tribe or clan and belongs to it or is ancestrally related to it.'
3. BBC Television series: 'Origin'.