

# ETHNOGENESIS AS AN ARENA: WERE THE LEMBA BLACK JEWS?

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Magdel Le Roux 2003, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* [with a preface by M.L. Daneel]. Pretoria: UNISA Press, 328 pp., 35 photos; list of abbreviations; bibliography; list of interviews; 3 addenda; index; ISBN 1.86888.283.7, pbk; Rand 169.50, US\$ 12.90, GB£ 8.20, Euro 11.30

## Introduction

In mid-July 2006, a colleague in the Department for the Study of Religions in the University of Ghana informed me that the Department was resuscitating *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology*. He asked me to contribute, at a week's notice, a one-page review of a book of my own choice. So, I looked at the books on my desk, spotted Magdel Le Roux's on the Lemba, and decided that her book dealt with a matter of interest to scholars of the religions of Africa, and that I might try to supply the requested review in a week, or at most in a fortnight. The one or two page review I planned has, however, meanwhile grown into review article, because the more closely I studied the book, the more I began to doubt whether, despite numerous qualifications, she is correct in presuming that the Lemba were indeed 'black Jews' with a past reaching into pre-exilic Israel. An alternative explanation of the data Le Roux provides seemed required. This article is an attempt at formulating one.

The structure of this article is as follows. After briefly referring to the place Parrinder accorded to Judaism in his division of Africa's religious plurality, I present a summary of Le Roux's book. I conclude it by noting the divergent positions Le Roux and Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) – one of her main research objects and the motor behind Lemba 'Judaisation' in recent decades – take in respect of the current LCA drive towards incorporating the Lemba into world Jewry. I begin my appreciation of the book by explaining why the purpose of her book requires that Le Roux stick to the dubious presumption that the Lemba have indeed an Israelite ancestry. Then I note the data she provides herself disconfirming it, and how Le Roux and LCA deal with that uncomfortable fact. Lastly, I introduce an alternative explanatory concept,

'the arena of identity construction', and show that it fits not only the LCA strategy of Judaisation, but also other kinds of identity construction undertaken by the Lemba in the past three centuries. It provides not only a more comprehensive explanation, but it is also one critical towards the truth claims of oral traditions, less ambitious in terms of historical ethnography, and better verifiable than the hypothesis underlying the book of Le Roux.

### **Africa's religious diversity**

It is commonly known that Africa's religious pluralism is much richer and denser than the division into ATRs, Christianity and Islam proposed by Parrinder in 1969 in his *Religion in Africa*.<sup>1</sup> Parrinder was aware, however, that his triad did not exhaust Africa's religious diversity, for he added a chapter on 'Other Religions'<sup>2</sup> in which he noted that 'Judaism [is] the oldest of the historical living religions of Africa.'<sup>3</sup> And also that Indians settling as traders or labourers in East and South Africa had added varieties of Hinduism, Sikhism, Parsism and Indian Islam to the religions of Africa.<sup>4</sup> As for Judaism in Africa, Parrinder enumerated, in chronological order, Jewish communities in ancient Egypt;<sup>5</sup> in North Africa under Islam;<sup>6</sup> in oases in the Sahara;<sup>7</sup> the 'fully indigenous' Falashas of Ethiopia, who 'follow religious practices which are mixed Jewish and pagan';<sup>8</sup> and the wealthy white Jews who began to immigrate into South Africa from Europe and America after 1820, established their first synagogue in Cape Town in 1841, and had built over 200 synagogues by 1960.<sup>9</sup> Except for the Falashas, all these Jewish communities in Africa had stayed in touch with 'mainstream' world Jewry in its several diaspora and more recently in Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted photomechanically in 1976 as *Africa's Three Religions*

<sup>2</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 223-227

<sup>3</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 223.

<sup>4</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 223.

<sup>5</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 223

<sup>6</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 223-224

<sup>7</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 224.

<sup>8</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 226.

<sup>9</sup> Parrinder 1969/1976: 226. For surveys of the Jewish communities in modern Africa, black and white, cf. Hellig 1996; Platvoet 1996: 74-77; Le Roux 2003: 18-28; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_Jew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Jew) ; <http://www.mindspring.com/~jaypsand/index.htm>.

### The book

The interest of Magdel Le Roux's book is that it is a study in depth of what is, in her view, most likely another black Jewish community, the Lemba, an ethnic group in Southern Africa. In her interviews with them between August 1994 and April 1997 (265-267),<sup>10</sup> she found that they have an oral tradition that they are 'children of Abraham', left Israel in pre-exilic times, migrated for trade first to Yemen, then to Somalia, and gradually on to Malawi to arrive ultimately in the south of modern Zimbabwe before 1777, and in the north of what is now South Africa by 1790 (1, 8, 15, 17, 24-27, 32-38, 45-46, 49-67, 70-71, 123, 144-146, 149, 155-158, 192, 215-216, 221-224, 235, 239, 242).<sup>11</sup> If that oral tradition is correct, not only ethnographically but also historically, the Lemba constitute a second group of 'black Jews' who were isolated, as were the Falasha – if their claims are accepted –,<sup>12</sup> from mainstream world Jewry for many centuries and remained 'practically unaffected by intra-Jewish migration' (79, 235).

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<sup>10</sup> All page numbers in the text refer to Le Roux 2003. References to this book in the footnotes, however, will be to Le Roux 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Part of that oral tradition is at least a century old (Le Roux 2003: 76n4). The Swiss missionary and anthropologist Henri A. Junod was the first ethnographer to publish an article on the Balemba of the Soutpansberg in the journal *Folk-lore* (19: 276-287) in 1908, in which he recorded that Lemba believed that their ancestors had come by boat to Africa as traders, had built trading places in different spots, kept themselves separate from the native peoples except for taking wives from them as they did not bring their own wives (Le Roux 2003: 33, 39, 49, 51, 152). Junod, however, attributed 'the retention of their Semitic habits for two centuries at least' to the 'wonderful grasp Mohammedanism has on the native mind', and not to an Israelite pedigree, even though he also noted that 'religiously speaking, the Balemba do not seem to have kept the slightest trace of faith in Allah and [...] adore the spirits of the forefathers just as the other natives do' (Junod 1908: 286 as quoted in Le Roux 1997; 2003: 49). The Inspector of the Berlin Missionary Society, D. Wangemann, visited Lemba in 1866 and 1867 and recorded 'several oral traditions on the origin of the Lemba', but found no mention of a tradition of migration from outside Africa, but merely that they had lived with Portuguese on the Zambezi (Le Roux 2003: 39).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Platvoet (1996: 75): 'Scholarship has veered away from [the] opinion [that the Falashas are descendants of Jews who had migrated into Africa in pre-exilic times] in recent years and established that [their] history [...] cannot be traced back with certainty earlier than the fifteenth century'. Authors like Haile, Kaplan (1992: 210) and Shelamy explain Falasha 'Judaisation' from 'the many Hebraic elements that were a prominent part of Ethiopian Christianity from its inception in the fourth century CE'.

This particular Lemba tradition has recently received a big boost from genetic investigations into the Y-chromosome markers reputedly typical of Jewish priestly (*Kohanim*) lineages: the so-called 'Cohen modal haplotype' (CMH)<sup>13</sup> was found to be present in 85% of the Lemba males.<sup>14</sup> Because genetic evidence supports this Lemba oral tradition about their migration from Africa, Le Roux regards this tradition as likely true and takes it seriously (19, 56, 63-67, 106, 224). She does not, however, endeavour to prove or disprove this contentious issue (8, 10, 31-78, 233), on which, she fears, 'no consensus will probably ever be reached' (73).

Her research interest in Lemba religion is, therefore, a different one. It is that of an OT-scholar specializing in the pre-monarchic period of early Israel (1250-1000 BCE) who finds a 'lost tribe of Israel' on her doorstep (1) and wonders 'whether the Lemba are closely enough linked to ancient Israelite faith to justify calling the Lemba a "lost tribe of Israel" or part of such a tribe' (235, 237). Her aim is also to find out whether a comparative study of the Lemba and ancient Israel will 'shed new light on our concept of early Israel and our understanding of the Old Testament and Christianity in Africa' (7, 75, 79-80).

Though she regards Lemba origin as a 'composite' one (74, 149, 235-236) rather than the purely Jewish or Israelite one her Lemba interviewees claim (e.g. 17, 25, 239), this cautious position still allows her to urge 'the possibility [...] that the Lemba do have archaic remnants of an ancient Israelite type of religion' (75, 242). She postulates that 'their self-

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Y-chromosomal\\_Aaron](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Y-chromosomal_Aaron);  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cohen\\_modal\\_haplotype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cohen_modal_haplotype)

<sup>14</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_Jew#The\\_Lemba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Jew#The_Lemba). Le Roux (2003: 64-66) gives the following CMH frequency figures for whole communities, Jewish and Lemba: 'while in Jewish populations in general the [CMH] frequency is 3 to 5 percent, [a]mong the Lemba it is 8.8 percent'; and for 'priestly' lineages: '45 percent of Ashkenazic priests and 56 percent of Sephardic priests have the *kohen genetic marker*, while [...] among the Buba [the Lemba 'priestly' clan, JP] it is as high as 53,8 percent' (cf. also: Le Roux 2003: 224;

<http://www.kulanu.org/lemba/hadassahonlemba.html>;  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/parfitt2.html> ). Le

Roux also notes that, whereas CMH data are therefore consistent with the claims of this Lemba oral tradition, they do not support the claims of the Falasha (Le Roux 19, 56, 63-67, 70-74, 105-107, 224).

identification as "children of Abraham" both evidences and conceals a much older and very complicated religious identity' with 'abundant echoes of ancient Judaism' (75, 149, 242), and 'resonat[ing] with the culture of some ancient Israelite clans' (79, 235). In order to determine in how far the Lemba reflect the Old Testament (7-8, 28), she conducted interviews (59-60, 79, 265-267) and participant observation among Lemba of the Soutpansberg area around the town of Louis Trichardt in the north of South Africa, and around Mberengwa in the south of Zimbabwe.

In terms of the historical ethnography of Southern Africa since the 16th century, the now *ca.* 60.000 Lemba (60) were known mainly as itinerant traders, of foreign ('Arab', 'Moor') descent, from Sena and Tete (on the Zambezi) and Sofala (on the coast), as is apparent from the other names by which the Lemba are also known: *Varemba* ('people who refuse' [to mix]), *Basena* ('people from Sena'), *Vamwenye* ('foreigners'), *Vhalungu* ('strangers'), *Mushavi* ('traders') (24- 25, 53, 73-74, 101-102).<sup>15</sup> At present the Lemba live scattered among other ethnic groups of Southern Africa, speak a local Bantu language, go to local schools, hold positions in local society and practise a local religion: indigenous,<sup>16</sup> Christian (2, 4, 6, 9, 14, 16, 53, 80, 117, 119, 141-143, 170, 239, 240), or Muslim.<sup>17</sup> Yet they also

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<sup>15</sup> The earliest mention of *Walembers*, Dutch for *Balemba*, occurs in VOC reports in 1721, 1726 and 1728. That of 1728 is by 'a Negro', Mahumane, who describes them in his report for the Dutch at Delagoa Bay as traders, a separate people, rich in gold, and doing trade with the Portuguese at Sena and Manica.

<sup>16</sup> Many Lemba venerate their ancestors with libations, the recitation of their names, beer-drinking, spirit possession, and taking meals at their graves (Mandivenga 1989: 111; Le Roux 2003: 109, 120, 122, 129-133, 141, 148, 166, 177, 178, 189, 190n15/18, 196).

<sup>17</sup> 17 On Lemba and Islam, cf. Chidester 1996: 215; Mandivenga 1989: 99-100; Le Roux 2003: 38, 52-53, 67-69, 71, 73-74, 121-122, 131, 143-146, 215, 236-237. Le Roux (38, 44, 46, 49-50, 168-169) quotes Dos Santos, Price (1954: 33-35), Junod (1908: 286, quoted in Le Roux 1997) and others on the severely truncated Islam of Muslim Lemba, who seemed not to have kept the slightest trace of faith in Allah, had no Qur'an, no Prophet Muhammed or (the name of) Allah, received no instruction in orally transmitted texts, did not observe the five daily prayers, the Friday, or the Ramadan and built no mosques, but adored the spirits of the forefathers just as the other natives do. Le Roux also remarks (2003: 42, 69, 71, 74) that the rules the Lemba observed were Semitic in origin and common to both Jews and Muslims, and therefore no proof that the Lemba must have been Muslims in the past, as Mandivenga (1989: 108) suggested. Cf. also Mandivenga (1989: 115) on the initial reaction of Varemba in

keep themselves apart from the 'impure' local *Kaffirs*, 'unbelievers', or *wasenzhi*, 'gentiles'/'pagans', by endogamy, by circumcising boys, and by abstention from pork, blood, and meat of animals that have not been bled to death (1, 17, 24-27, 29n16, 37, 59, 77n27, 80-86, 88-92, 123, 162-169, 176, 178, 188-189, 198, 216-217, 239-240).

In the course of history, however, and especially through colonization, says Le Roux, the Lemba became a religious amalgam 'of "Judaism", Christianity, African traditional religions and Islam' (149) with multiple and fragmented identities who 'readily reconciled their Old Testament related customs and traditions with the Christian faith' (2, 6, 9, 15-16, 24, 40, 74, 122-123, 131, 191, 239-240). Unlike many other African Christians, the Lemba did not join AICs,<sup>18</sup> but remained loyal to the Dutch Reformed and Lutheran mainline churches that had established mission stations in the Soutpansberg and Mberengwa areas (239).

In terms of education, means of livelihood and social standing modern Lemba range from semi-literate farmers in rural villages to urban professionals, businessmen, medical doctors and university professors.<sup>19</sup>

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the Gutu district of Zimbabwe to Islam. When Indian Muslim missionaries invited them in 1975 to 'reconvert' to Islam, 'the response ranged from mixed to cold'. By 1980, however, some 1,400 (of the 20,000 Zimbabwean) Varembe had converted to Islam according to these missionaries (Mandivenga 1989: 120-121). *Imam* Mutazu of the Muslim Centre at Chinyika in Zimbabwe informed Le Roux (2003: 144, 154) in July 1997 that 'only one hundred fifty of a possible two thousand Lembás in the vicinity' are practising Muslims.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. however, Le Roux (2003: 142): 'Many Lemba people, especially in Mogabane [in Sekhukhuneland], are joining ZCC' [Zion Christian Church, an important AIC from Zimbabwe]. Cf. also Le Roux 1997: 'Most of the informants from Sekhukhuneland are in fact members of the ZCC'. But she attributes this 'anomaly' to the fact that the mainline Christian churches are absent from Sekhukhuneland (<http://www.geocities.com/Missionalia/jews4j1.htm>).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. <http://www.mindspring.com/~jaypsand/lemba6.htm>: 'The South African Lemba are, on the whole, a well-educated, successful group. Many Lemba are university graduates and work in professional areas – they are doctors, lawyers, professors, salesmen, computer programmers and landowners'. An example is Dr Rudo Mathivha, daughter of Prof. M.E.R. Mathivha, who was trained as a medical doctor in the USA and was a Specialist ICU Pediatrician and Head of the ICU Unit at Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1999. In recent years she has actively contributed to the strengthening of LCA contacts with white Jews in South Africa (cf. <http://www.haruth.com/JewishLemba.html>).

A prime example is the late M.E.R. Mathivha (†2002), Professor of African Linguistics in the University of Venda at Pietersburg (now Polokwane) from 1973<sup>20</sup> till his retirement.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, Mathivha was President of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) for many years. He and LCA strongly promoted the Judaisation of the Lemba (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 26, 30n33, 37, 47, 53, 57, 58-59, 62, 66, 71-72, 81-83, 89, 96, 105, 106, 108, 119, 127, 129, 141, 144-146, 148, 153, 156-157, 161n2, 171, 172, 175-177, 192, 195-196, 197, 198, 211-214, 216, 218, 219, 220-221, 237, 240, 241).<sup>22</sup>

Le Roux devoted the greater part of her book (79-243) to the comparison of Lemba culture as 'syncretizing Judaism' (80, 117, 141, 149, 191, 236) with that of pre-monarchic Israel. In chapter four, she compares their food taboos, marriage customs, burial customs, professional skills and social organisation. In chapters five to eight, she examines Lemba culture and that of ancient Israel after four of Ninian Smart's dimensions of worldview analysis: the experiential, the mythical, the ritual and the legal/ethical aspects of their religions (10-11, 117-118, 126, 174, 237). In chapter five, she compares Lemba and Israelite concepts of God; of circumcision as covenant; of mountains; and of ancestors. And she also compares Lemba communication with the ancestors through possession rituals with the position of ancestors in early Israelite religion (119-140); as well as how the Lemba and early Israel reacted to the religions surrounding them (140-150). The subject of chapter six is the creation and migration myths of the Lemba and ancient Israel (151- 161). That of chapter seven is Lemba and

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<sup>20</sup> From semi-literate farmers in rural villages to urban professionals, businessmen, medical doctors and university professors. A prime example is the late M.E.R. Mathivha (†2002),

<sup>21</sup> He was already retired in August 1994 when Le Roux interviewed him for the first time (Le Roux 2003: 265). I have not been able to establish the year in which he actually retired. He also served as vice-principal of the University of the North for some time (cf. <http://www.haruth.com/JewishLemba.html>; <http://www.saudades.org/TheLemba.htm>; <http://www.cryptojews.com/Lemba.htm>). The University of Venda (a 'Bantustan' from 1973 to 1994), now University of Limpopo, currently has a MER Mathivha Centre for African Studies, Arts and Culture, also termed MER Mathivha Centre for African Languages, in particular for the study of languages spoken in the Limpopo Province: Northern Sotho, Tshivenda and Xitsonga (cf. <http://www.unorth.ac.za/About/about-ulturf.html>).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also Mathivha 1992.

Israelite rites of passage – male circumcision and female initiation, and the New Moon celebrations – and animal sacrifices (162-190). And that of chapter eight is Lemba and Israelite law and ethics, as ‘covenant’, as case-law, as respecting inheritance and women, and as expressed in proverbs (191-208).

In chapter nine, Le Roux investigates how traditions were transmitted in the oral cultures of the Lemba and ancient Israel, and how they functioned in the expression of their group identities. In respect of Lemba oral culture, she notes the effects of the LCA-conferences, ‘inscripturation’ (writing oral traditions down), and political changes on Lemba oral traditions (209-222). And she musters the eleven arguments she gathered from Lemba oral traditions, archaeology and genetics in favour of her presumption that the Lemba did originate from a Semitic /‘Jewish’/Israelite population outside Africa (222-224). Then she discusses how the oral culture of Israel was transmitted at sanctuaries, functioned in the expression of its worldview, and was affected by being written down and by political changes; and how archaeology disconfirms some traditions that had become central after being written down (224-232). Lastly, she compares the two (232-234).

In her concluding chapter (235-242) Le Roux admits that Parfitt<sup>23</sup> may be right: the Lemba may ‘merely [be] an African group who somewhere along the way made a religious shift to Judaism’(236).<sup>24</sup> Even so, she opts

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<sup>23</sup> Tudor Parfitt is Professor of Modern Jewish Studies at SOAS, London. He did extensive research on Jews in Yemen and Ethiopia, and since the mid-1980s also on the Lemba. He was instrumental in having the Lemba included in the comparative CMH genetic research. He credits the Lemba genetically, historically and culturally with some undefined Semitic connection, rather than one to ancient Israel: ‘the balance of probability is that the Y chromosome [in Lemba males] came, let’s say, a thousand years ago from south Arabia rather than [...] from some wandering Jewish peddler of whom we’ve never heard’ (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/parfitt2.html>). He thinks they made a religious shift towards Judaism in the recent past (Le Roux 2003: 13-18, 26, 28-29 [notes 2-5, 7, 9], 64, 66, 68, 69, 89-90, 171, 173, 221, 222, 236; Parfitt 2002, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Le Roux makes several such admissions. One is that the frontier comparativists, discussed in Chidester 1996, ‘could have been responsible for the assimilation of some of the elements’ of the identities of indigenous groups, such as the Lemba (Le Roux 2003: 28, 29n18). Another that Gita Buijs may be correct that Lemba ethnic consciousness is not a carry-over from the past but a twentieth-century construction by LCA ‘at a time when European domination in South Africa seemed irreversible’ (Le Roux 2003: 26-27). A third is that ‘the link [of *ngoma lugundu*] to the Ark of the Covenant was

to maintain – as time and again she does when she refers to an explanation, more probable than hers, that does not suit her basic postulate<sup>25</sup> – ‘that there is at least a *very strong indication of an earlier [pre-African] correlation between the culture of the Lemba and that of early Israel*’ (236, her italics; 237). In her view, the Lemba did not derive their Judaism from the Christian missionaries. They merely ‘reinforced what [the Lemba] had already believed’, which patrimony Le Roux defines as ‘a *syncretising, pluralistic pre-Talmudic Judaism*’ (236, her italics).

As this pre-Talmudic Judaism is unique in the world of religions, it should not be tampered with, for if it is, that ‘ancient type of religion may forever be lost to research’ (237). Le Roux is, therefore, unhappy with recent LCA initiatives to call on Kulanu<sup>26</sup> to send a Jewish Rabbi and establish education centres through which LCA may transform Lemba Judaism into that of modern mainstream Jewry and have the Lemba accepted into it, as were the Falashas.<sup>27</sup> She contends that her comparison of Lemba and

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possibly only suggested later [to the Lemba] by Jewish groups or [Christian] missionaries’ (Le Roux 2003: 126, 155). A fourth is that ‘the cult of the ancestors might be an influence from the African traditional religions’ (Le Roux 2003: 130). A fifth that ‘possibly the Lemba [...] are a mixture of Arab traders and the local populations’ (Le Roux 2003: 155). A sixth is that ‘it could be possible that somewhere in the past the Lemba received the practice of circumcision through Muslim influence’ (Le Roux 2003: 166). A seventh is that ‘the idea of the covenant [...] was “suggested” [to the Lemba] by missionaries’ (Le Roux 2003: 188). An eighth is that ‘maybe the missionaries made [the Lemba] aware of how their own customs and laws resembled those of the Old Testament’ (Le Roux 2003: 207).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Le Roux 2003: 9, 27-28, 31, 34, 38, 40, [61-]73-75, 79, 98-99, 104-105, 126, 130, 155, 166-167, 171, 174, 188, 189, 192, 207, 216-217, 219, 220, 221, 232, 235.

<sup>26</sup> Kulanu (‘All of Us’) is a Jewish outreach organisation, based in the USA, dedicated to finding remnants of the Jewish people dispersed and lost through exile, such as the ten tribes lost in the Assyrian exile, or through forced conversion, such as the Marranos, and to assisting them, if they so wish, with re-establishing contact with modern world Jewry, conversion and relocation in Israel (cf. <http://www.kulanu.org/>; Le Roux 2003: 242n3). Kulanu also assists communities without Jewish background who wish to embrace Judaism, such as the Abayudaya in Uganda and the House of Israel Community at Sefwi Wiaso, Ghana (cf. <http://www.kulanu.org/ghana/index.html>).

<sup>27</sup> Le Roux was present at the first meeting between ‘the enthusiastic’ Rabbi Leo Abrami and LCA members in January 2002, and noted their shock when ‘the Rabbi

ancient Israel has shown 'remarkable commonalities' and 'numerous points of convergence', that have implications for the teaching of OT in Africa. For it is, she says, imperative to forestall two serious shortcomings of past Christian and current Jewish missionary work among the Lemba: the 'unconditional rejection of African religion and culture', and inadequate knowledge of OT. The latter causes missionaries to fail to perceive the striking similarities OT has with some African traditional cultures (238-239).

Le Roux lauds past Lemba promotion of circumcision among other ethnic groups as well as Lemba rituals for incorporating non-Lemba, especially women, into Lemba society 90, 239- 240).<sup>28</sup> She deplores that LCA has discontinued this proselytising praxis of reaching out to non-Lemba and is steering an exclusivist, 'Deuteronomist' course through its annual conferences for fear that Lemba are completely assimilated into the other ethnic groups. She also regrets that LCA sees the Christian churches as a threat (239-240, 241-242). She warns: 'The visit of the Rabbis from America could be an important crossroad for the Lemba' (241). Lastly, though the Lemba are surely not one of the ten lost tribes of Israel taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 727 BCE (242), Le Roux maintains that the Lemba 'know where they come from, [...] were guided by *Mwari* to specific places, [...] and want to live separately from other people' (241). All of which she takes for 'abundant echoes of ancient Judaism' (241).

### Appreciation

It is clear that Le Roux favours traditional 'syncretist Lemba Judaism' and deplores the course steered by LCA towards the incorporation of the Lemba into modern world Jewry for a number of reasons. One is that most

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totally [...] discredited all Christians and Jesus Christ' and explained that 'exclusively those who have a Jewish father or mother and who are fully converted to Judaism might be called Jewish according to the High Court in Israel'. Most younger people were 'totally confused' and did not turn up for the rest of the conference' (Le Roux 2003: 145). For the Rabbi's distinctly different impression of this meeting, cf. his report at <http://www.kulanu.org/lemba/visitlemba.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also: 'As far as their religio-cultural practices are concerned, the Lemba are active "missionaries" to the Ba-Venda and other surrounding groups, and many outsiders have already been proselytised' (quoted from Le Roux 1997, on <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/jews4j1.htm#FOOTNOTE>). Among these outsiders are five Germans who were initiated into the Varembe community in Zimbabwe through circumcision by the 'high priest' in Mberengwa.

Lemba traditionally had no problem with combining their 'Jewish' culture – of aloofness, etc. – with the Christian religion.<sup>29</sup> For another, because biblical scholars have recently reached a consensus that pre-monarchic Israel likewise was religiously pluralist (146-147) rather than exclusivist and xenophobic as Deuteronomist historiography presents it (240). And most importantly, because the purpose of her book rests on the postulate that the Lemba are indeed 'black Jews' with some genetic, cultural and religious pedigree reaching back through Yemenite Jews into pre-exilic Israel. For only in that case does her comparison demonstrate 'commonalities' between Lemba and ancient Israelite religion other than would emerge from the comparison of pre-monarchic Israelite religion with virtually any other African indigenous religion. For 'ATRs' were and are as 'syncretist' as Lemba 'Judaism' and ancient Israel. Throughout non-Muslim Africa, Africans have demonstrated, in the past century and a half, a preoccupation with, and predilection for, the Old Testament.

Le Roux has wisely maintained a question mark in the title of her book and insists time and again only on the possibility that the Lemba have a Jewish-Semitic origin beyond Africa. But she insists on it in order to make sure that that possibility is not excluded, however unlikely it be.<sup>30</sup> For she is aware that very different explanations of Lemba religious history have found favour in recent research on the Lemba. Her position is a courageous but lonely one.<sup>31</sup> In her discussions with other scholars she found to her dismay 'a total rejection of the possibility that the Lemba had Jewish forebears' (75). She, however, regards that 'possibility' as highly likely because of 'the recent genetic findings and the concurring oral traditions of the Lemba' (75, 106, 108, 224), and has made it into the very foundation of her book.

It is also its Achilles heel. Recent studies have shown that the CMH marker is found not only in Jews and Lemba but is also the most common

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<sup>29</sup> E.g., 'In Sekhukhuneland circumcision and baptism are being conducted in the same river by the same people (240).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *supra* note 24 for page references.

<sup>31</sup> She took a different position in 1997: 'The Lemba way of life might evidence vestigial traces of Jewish or Israelite belief, practice or custom but, on the whole, their way of life and beliefs cannot be described as Jewish'. Yet she maintained then also that 'despite many indigenous features, all the above-mentioned [Lemba] practices and perceptions do resemble the religious culture of the ancient people of Israel' (cf. <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/jews4j1.htm#FOOTNOTE>).

haplotype among Southern and Central Italians, Hungarians, and Iraqi Kurds, and is also found among many Armenians, and in many Palestinian Arabs.<sup>32</sup> And in a recent study of 1371 men from around the world, geneticist Michael Hammer of the University of Arizona in Tucson found that the Y chromosome in Middle Eastern Arabs was almost indistinguishable from that of Jews.<sup>33</sup> Steve Jones, a University College London geneticist, also argues against the Lemba being a lost tribe 'with uninterrupted genetic contact with the Middle East': 'the Cohen modal haplotype might well have bounced down the African continent over the generations and been eventually absorbed by the Lemba.'<sup>34</sup>

Another problem with her basic postulate is that she unreservedly presents all the data in the literature on the Lemba and in the interviews that support her position, as the culture of any and every Lemba<sup>35</sup> but ignores those that disconfirm it. In addition, though she notes the anti-Christian, Judaizing policy of Mathivha,<sup>36</sup> LCA,<sup>37</sup> and some other Lemba leaders,<sup>38</sup> she fails to

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. <http://www.ariga.com/genes.shtml>. The fact that CMH is found frequently in Palestinian Arab Muslims matches with 'historical accounts that some Moslem Arabs are descended from Christians and Jews who lived in the southern Levant, a region that includes Israel and the Sinai. They were descendants of a core population that lived in the area since prehistoric times.'

<sup>33</sup> Cf. <http://www.ariga.com/genes.shtml>.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Cohen 2000 at <http://www.slate.com/id/79372/>.

<sup>35</sup> The traits specific for the Lemba of South Africa, and those particular for the Vemba of Zimbabwe excepted.

<sup>36</sup> 36 Mathivha added modern biblical chronology to Lemba migration traditions (Le Roux 2003: 153, 161n2). He also introduced OT-prophetic explanations into Lemba migration traditions when he wrote that the dispersion of the Lemba from Sena and their splitting up into a southward and a westward migration was due to God punishing them with illness for 'unbecoming practices' (157). He and other Lemba intellectuals, such as the Roman Catholic priest, Rev. Father Marimazhira (interviewed at Zvishavane, Zimbabwe in April 1996), embellished Lemba traditions with biblical metaphors, such as that the Lemba were guided by a star in their migrations in Africa; carried the *ngoma lugundi*, 'the drum that thunders', with them as the Israeli carried the Ark of the Covenant; and that the drum was guarded at night by a pillar of flame (47, 55, 156, 157, 161n7, 221).

<sup>37</sup> Le Roux (2003: 211, 212) remarks that Lemba Jewish identity is 'kept alive artificially by the annual LCA conferences'.

pay due attention to the numerous other divergent interests, biases, factions and strategies inherent in her data. Nor does she present her data – except for those of the LCA ‘party’ in as far as they are anti-Christian – as particular, interest driven, factional views of Lemba tradition, each eager to present itself as the Lemba tradition, and all alert and eager to appropriate any resources available at a particular time and place by which they may strengthen their position in the arena of modern ethnogenesis in Southern Africa.

### **Disconfirmation**

That there is such an arena and struggle is apparent from a number of data in her book that do not sit well with her basic postulate that the Lemba are ‘Jews’ who keep themselves aloof from the *wasenzi*. Le Roux mentions them in passing only. One is that respondents who never attended the LCA conferences knew nothing about being Jewish (153). Another is that many Lemba intermarry with non-Lemba (89). A third is that many Lemba are not circumcised (166). Some who are circumcised complain that ‘circumcision is [...] going down and down and down’ (167). Others admit that circumcision is not unique to the Lemba (167, 20, 169, 189n2, 190n4).

A fourth is that when they do circumcise, ‘not all Lemba connect circumcision with the Covenant with God’ (149). In particular the relatively unschooled do not do so. An example is William Atsoma, alias Napi, the traditional healer. He served as one of Le Roux’s ‘most informative interviewees’ (162), eagerly showed her around on Mt. Leolo, where these rites are performed, and sang ‘every song and chant’ for her that the elders use for instruction during these rites. Despite being ‘fully involved in male and female circumcision and initiation’ (163), he ‘could not tell much about the general meaning behind the ceremony’ (167).<sup>39</sup>

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She adds that LCA uses ‘every possible means of communication to confirm the [Lemba-Jewish] identity [of the participants in the annual LCA conference] and to transmit this to the next generation’.

<sup>38</sup> Such as Marimazhira (cf. also note 36), and ‘the High Priest’ Zvinowanda at Mberengwa, Zimbabwe (cf. note 40).

<sup>39</sup> He invented ‘female circumcision’ (Le Roux 2003: 169-172, 217), which is not mentioned by Mathiva and other authors, and is expressly denied by Mante Mpaketsane, mother of the chief of Sekhukhuneland (171).

Circumcision as covenant with God is 'mainly' emphasized by Lemba leaders and intellectuals (149, 216, 219), such as Prof. Mathivha (119, 141, 156-158, 167, 241) and LCA; the 'high priest'<sup>40</sup> Zvinowanda at Mberengwa (121-123, 125-126, 193, 216, 240); the RC Father Marimazhira at Zvishavane, Zimbabwe (126, 167); the late Wilfred Phophi, a Lemba informant of Van Warmelo<sup>41</sup> and Parfitt (37, 39, 67, 168-169, 177); some Varembe interviewees of Le Roux around Mberengwa where Protestant missionaries had emphasized the idea of the covenant in their sermons for many decades (188, 192, 216); and the Varembe *imam* Shef Ali Mutazu (121- 122, 143-144, 150n3, 154, 192). As for Varembe around Mberengwa, Le Roux adds, however, that 'it is not always clear that all [= very few?] observe it as a treaty between God and themselves' (192).

A fifth is that 'the Lemba themselves' never make the connection between the *ngoma lugundi*, the 'drum that thunders', and the Ark of the Covenant (126, 155). A sixth is that despite the 'tremendous emphasis' [some] Lemba said was put on the 'laws of cleanness', 'real life shows that not all of them [= very few of them?] live according to Leviticus 11' (207-208). As is also apparent from the fact that most Lemba do not keep milk and meat separate (82).<sup>42</sup> Two more such unsettling items are that most Lemba do not fast (85, 178); and that very few Lemba still [?] know the ceremony surrounding the New Moon Festival (172). In brief, as Le Roux admits in

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<sup>40</sup> Le Roux 1997: 'Zvinowanda Zvinowanda [is] the High Priest of the family of priests in Mberengwa (Zimbabwe)' who conducts the ritual of circumcision and 'provides guidance in many ways'. 'The family of priests' refers most likely to the Buba clan of the Varembe around Mberengwa (cf. Le Roux 2003: 65). Le Roux is also informed that a priest learns all his skills from his father and in turn prepares his son to become the next priest.

<sup>41</sup> Nicolaas Jacobus van Warmelo (1904-1989) obtained his PhD in African Languages *summa cum laude* in 1927, was briefly Professor of African Languages at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and then served as 'State Ethnologist' till his retirement in 1969. He published 17 books and numerous articles on the Anthropology of Southern Africa (<https://www.up.ac.za/dspace/handle/2263/89>).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. also Le Roux 1997: 'Mathivha (1992: 61) also emphasises [...] that [the Lemba] were prohibited from mixing meat and milk when eating. [...] However, as a result of "cultural diffusion" (as some Lemba intellectuals call it), I could not find any Lemba families who still refrain from mixing meat and milk when eating'.

the concluding chapter, most Lemba 'no longer observe their distinctive Lemba customs' (241).

In order to be able to maintain her basic assumption in the face of these disconfirmations Le Roux writes that most Lemba 'no longer' observe distinctive Lemba customs. She thereby implies that Lemba did usually and normally observe them in the past. The question is, however, whether that assumption is correct. Did [most] Lemba indeed observe customs that were distinctively 'Jewish' in the past? I suggest first that the customs by which Lemba could keep aloof from other ethnic groups were merely one identity option among several other alternatives in the Lemba cultural heritage, past and present; secondly, that some Lemba did indeed at times practice segregating customs, when that was convenient, but that we do not know whether they were 'Jewish' customs; thirdly, that many Lemba did not segregate; and fourthly, that the practice of 'Jewish' customs is a recent invention of tradition<sup>43</sup>

### **The 'Enemy within'**

Le Roux too senses that the current failure of many Lemba to comply in so many crucial respects with the demands of her basic postulate is unsettling. However, instead of acknowledging that Lemba were not only religiously 'syncretist', but also culturally pluralist, and analysing and explaining that cultural pluralism historically, she and LCA cope with this cognitive dissonance by presenting them as merely a 'few differences' (218), and by attributing current Lemba 'cultural dilution' (27, 240) to a semi-mystical

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<sup>43</sup> 'Inventions of tradition are 'paradigmatic identity constructs of a particular group of people at a time of swift and unsettling change, by which they construct, and claim, continuity of identity with a suitable, but mainly mythical past (Hobsbawm 1993). Such "traditions" are usually invented at a time when a society is forcefully made aware of its past identity by its becoming part – willy-nilly – of larger frameworks – political, economical, cultural and other – and must adapt to much wider horizons. Inventions of traditions "call in the old world to redress the balance of the new" (Cannadine 1993: 124). They are also counter-inventions, because they serve, implicitly or explicitly, to establish some measure of insularity within, and a cultural, non-political opposition to, those wider frameworks. A celebration of "us" is explicit in all of them, and a dichotomy of "us" versus "them" is at least implicit in them, and at times their very heart' (Platvoet & van Rinsum 2003: 132-133). For examples from European history, cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1993; for examples from African history, cf. Ranger 1993; Platvoet 1991; Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003; for the related subject of 'identity management', cf. Platvoet 1985.

'Enemy within' (198, 221). The 'Satan'<sup>44</sup> that in their view seduces modern Lemba to abandon their separation from the *wasenzhi* is 'cultural diffusion' (109, 198, 230, 241). Le Roux and LCA define it as the 'threat of complete assimilation by other peoples' (219, 221) and [cultural] 'eradication' (240). They present the Lemba as the innocent and involuntary victims of modernisation: because of cultural diffusion they 'can no longer adhere loyally to many Lemba rules and regulations, as they would have preferred' (198). By this wording they hide that many Lemba are rather the active agents and pragmatic manipulators of modernisation – as LCA is itself – as I show below.

LCA intends to defeat this 'Enemy within' by three means. One is by calling together the Lemba clans from both South Africa and Zimbabwe to LCA conferences in order to 'very explicitly' convey and display Lemba 'Jewish' customs and traditions to them (212-217, 233). Another is by negotiating with the government of South Africa for 'their own homeland [...] in the vicinity of the mission station at Mara (Limpopo Province)' (55-56, 218, 221, 241) since 1995.<sup>45</sup> By this attempt at reviving *apartheid*, Mathivha intended to consolidate the scattered Lemba into one Jewish 'nation', with LCA as its 'national' cultural association (30n33).<sup>46</sup> Le Roux is ambivalent about this LCA ambition for a Lemba 'homeland'. She doubts whether it is feasible 'in the rainbow nation of the new South Africa' (221). But she also expresses the hope that 'their land claim case will be settled this year' [2002?] (241). The third is by calling in Kulanu<sup>47</sup> for gaining access to world Jewry and be accepted by the white Jews of South Africa.

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<sup>44</sup> Wendl & Rösler (1999: 23) note that the 'local fundamentalisms' of cultural purists, and the celebrations of hybridity, crossover, fragmentation and heterogeneity of cultural relativists are 'dialectically related as demonised counter-images of each other'.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Le Roux 1997.

<sup>46</sup> After Mathivha's death, Samuel Moeti became LCA President. Moeti is also a Member of Parliament (12n2, 30-n33, 57, 58, 219); cf. also Moeti 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. note 25.

### The arena of identities

In my view, Le Roux should have taken to heart her pertinent statement in respect of codes of law that they 'often do not relate to the real way of life' (191). That is also true of group identity constructs. The seven points of disconfirmation I adduced above demonstrate that the uniform picture she and LCA paint of the Lemba as a people with a common Jewish identity and a tradition accepted by Lemba generally about their migration from ancient Israel through Yemen to Southern Africa, does not match with 'the real way of [Lemba] life', past and present, especially at grassroots. Current and past Lemba group identity seems actually manifold rather than uniform. Le Roux readily admits that current Lemba identity is diverse, for it is an outcome of her interviews. But she refuses to admit that for the Lemba past, because it questions the very foundation of her book.

I, however, suggest that diversity of group identity has been part and parcel of Lemba history as far as we can trace it back. For since the early 18th century the arena of group identity construction in Southern Africa has offered the Lemba a range of options of traditions about themselves, some of which were invented for them by others.<sup>48</sup> In interaction with those outsiders, Lemba pragmatically developed the particular identities that suited them best at a specific time and place. One such process, LCA construction of Lemba Jews, has been well documented by Le Roux, but only partly noticed and analysed by her.

### LCA construction of Lemba 'Jews'

For constructing a 'Jewish' Lemba group identity, Lemba intellectuals<sup>49</sup> and LCA leaders could shop with 18th and 19th century

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<sup>48</sup> The initial impetus for an invention of tradition has often come from outsiders. An English Quaker from Lancastershire invented the kilt for the Scots (Trevor-Roper 1993: 21-22); and the liberal theology of religions of white Protestant missionaries in Africa is the source of the current myth embraced by many Africans that 'Africa is incurably religious' (Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2004: 128-129).

<sup>49</sup> Le Roux (2003: 42, 44, 47, 52, 74, 161n5, 192, 219, 256-257) refers to the following Lemba authors and their publications. I note them in chronological order. The teacher M.N. Mphelo published 'The Balemba of Northern Transvaal' in 1936 in the *Native Teacher's Journal* 16, 1: 35-44. E. Mudau, who had already been awarded the First Prize by the International Institute of African Languages for his essay in Venda on the *ngoma lungundu* in 1928, contributed in 1940 a chapter on 'Ngoma-lungundu and the Early Invaders of Venda' to Van Warmelo's *Ethnological Publications* 8 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1940: 10-32). M.F. Mamadi too contributed a chapter on 'The

'frontier comparativists', who invented origins in ancient Israel, ancient Egypt, or Arabia for the Khoikhoi, the Zulu, Sotho-Tswana and Xhosa (19-23, 25, 27, 28).<sup>50</sup> And they would celebrate Paul Kruger (1825-1904), President of the Transvaal Republic from 1883 to 1900, for 'discovering',<sup>51</sup> and declaring publicly, that the Lemba were Jews (212), thereby founding a tradition of great interest among *Boer* farmers in Transvaal in these 'Kruger Jews.'<sup>52</sup> LCA honoured Kruger by holding the annual LCA conferences on his birthday, 10 October, or on a date close to it (27, 212).

They might garner further 'proof' from the Old Testament as Protestant missionaries had exposed it to them since the late 19th century (19). In the tradition of the frontier comparativists of 'impos[ing] the idea of a Semitic heritage on almost all the indigenous people in southern Africa'(25), these missionaries 'strongly suspected [the Lemba] of being Semitic in origin'

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Copper Miners of Musina' to that volume (pp. 81-86). In 1958 M.M. Motenda-Mbelengwa published an article on 'The Lemba Tribe' in the South African journal *Bantu/Bantoe* (2: 61-65). L.T. Marole published *Lusakha Iwa Vha- Lemba* at the Marole Book Depot at Sibasa, Vandaland; South Africa, in 1969. In 1989 Samuel Moeti, the current LCA President, published 'Lemba Religion and Rituals' in *Jewish Affairs* (44, 5: 43-46), a periodical of the South African white Jews. And in 1992 Professor M.E.R. Mathivha († 2002), past LCA President, privately published *The Basena/Vamwenye/Balemba* (Morester: The Author, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. also Chidester 1996: 27, 50-56, 88, 92-94, 95, 98, 99, 117-118, 124-127, 133, 137-138, 148-149, 137-138, 168-170, 202-203, 216, 222-223. Frontiers comparativists traced the Lemba usually to an Islamic origin (Chidester 1996: 215; cf. *supra* note 17; Le Roux 2003: 25).

<sup>51</sup> Thomas *et al.* 2000: 674.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Le Roux (2003: 1, 57, 60, 265, 266) on the farmers Piet Wessels, Henning, Dr. Smalle and Peet Uys, and on the former school principal Piet van den Berg, the retired Inspector of Bantu Education in the Soutpansberg area, P.W. van Heerden, and the Lemba and Venda art collectors Victor Madden and Karen Marais, all of who 'testify about the uniqueness of the Lemba and their exclusive customs' (60). Wessels introduced Le Roux to this 'fascinating group of people with their Semitic features and practices' in 1984 (1). At Henning's farm Sweet Waters, LCA erected a structure in which it holds its annual conferences (57). It also intends to build a synagogue there (57). Le Roux interviewed Peet Uys in October 1995, and P.W. van Heerden in May 1996 (265, 266).

(25) as did most missionary anthropologists and other scholars who reported on the Lemba.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The following authors, in chronological order, have contributed to that 'suspicion'. In 1888 the explorer A.A. Anderson viewed the Lemba as a remnant of the rulers of Monomotapa and wondered whether they might be 'of Arab blood or closely connected with that race' (Le Roux 2003: 47, 246). The Berlin missionary Schlömann reported in 1894 that the Lemba concluded the prayers they addressed to the ancestors with the Hebrew word *amina*, held frequent prayer sessions, used a special language in them, held the number seven sacred, had a different manner of burying the dead, and practiced circumcision. All these, he said, suggested a Semitic connection (Le Roux 2003: 48- 49, 51, 260). In 1899, the ethnologist J. Flygare too deduced from the customs of the 'small and despised tribe of the Balemba' that they must have had some connection and kinship with Semitic peoples (Le Roux 2003: 46-47, 251). The Swiss missionary anthropologist Henry A. Junod likewise suspected in 1908 that the Lemba were Semitic traders

from beyond Africa, but noted that they had since been deeply influenced by 'Mohammedanism' (Le Roux 2003: 33, 39, 49, 51, 100, 101, 152, 169, 253-254; cf. also *supra* note 11). Also in 1908, the Berlin missionary R. Wessmann found striking similarities between the Balemba and the ancient Hebrews (Le Roux 2003: 49-50, 194, 265). The ethnologist C. Bullock was of the opinion in 1927 [1950] that the Lemba were descendants of a Semitic, probably Arab, race because of the manner they interred the dead (Le Roux 2003: 50, 68, 95, 96, 248). The Swiss missionary A.A. Jaques concluded in 1931 to a Jewish rather than Muslim origin of the Lemba because they ended their prayers on *Amin* and referred to *Mozes* in them (Le Roux 2003: 50, 51, 62, 96, 101, 169, 176, 253). The anthropologist Hugh A. Stayt regarded the Lemba in 1931 as an Arabic-Bantu tribe that had descended from Arab traders (Le Roux 2003: 36, 40, 43, 51, 67-68, 101-102, 108, 173, 262). In 1937, G.P. Lestrade, the first South African government anthropologist and Professor of Bantu Languages in the University of Cape Town, maintained that 'the Lemba were either Arabs themselves or an admixture of Semitic groups' (Le Roux 2003: 100, 255). In 1942, L.C. Thompson wrote that Lemba rites and customs resembled those of the Abyssinian Falasha and showed both Jewish and Islamic traits. He viewed Lemba as descendants of Falasha who had come to Sofala for trade (Le Roux 2003: 70, 178, 262). The linguist and anthropologist Nicolaas J. van Warmelo recorded in 1946 that the Lemba are strongly suspected of being Semitic in origin (Le Roux 2003: 25, 39-40, 47, 49, 51, 52, 109, 263-264; cf. also *supra* note 41). The ethnologist J.B. de Vaal viewed the Lemba in 1947 and 1958 as Semitic Bantus who had been subjected to both Jewish and Arab influences (Le Roux 2003: 46, 47, 53, 67, 74, 102, 194, 250). In 1953, D. Möller-Malan suggested an original Lemba Jewish group identity by depicting the role of the *ngoma lugundu* in Lemba migrations after the model of the OT Ark of the Covenant (Le Roux 123-124, 257); as did the folklorist Greta Bloomhill in 1960, who added that it was guarded at night by a pillar of flame (Le Roux 2003: 155-156, 247). So did also the Swedish missionary anthropologist Harald von Sicard who also considered the Lemba in 1962 to be descendants

Lemba leaders might moreover draw on those late 19th and 20th century British and Rhodesian authors who were 'intent on proving that the city and architecture [of Great Zimbabwe] were not Zimbabwean creations.'<sup>54</sup> But they did 'connect the Lemba [...] with the building of Great Zimbabwe' (25, 26, 47, 48) and of other sites (53-54), usually as masons and craftsmen, and credited them with a Semitic origin (25, 47, 169) or with 'Caucasoid genes' (61). Four of them<sup>55</sup> are the British explorer and archaeologist J. Theodore Bent,<sup>56</sup> the Rhodesian journalist Richard N. Hall,<sup>57</sup> J.E. Mullan,<sup>58</sup> and Robert Gayre of Gayre and Nigg.<sup>59</sup>

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from the Falasha (Abyssinian Black Jews) (Le Roux 2003: 37, 70-71, 100-101, 106, 108-109, 125, 264). The Rhodesian archaeologist Roger Summers viewed the Lemba in 1963 as 'distinctly Semitic' with 'undoubted connections with the Arabs' (Le Roux 2003: 48; Garlake 1982: 61). In 1978, the ethnologist H.P. Connoway 'still recorded clear traditions of [Lemba] Israelite origins' (Le Roux 2003: 55, 67, 69, 71-72, 105, 248-249).

<sup>54</sup>Garlake 1982: 63. Cf. also Le Roux (2003: 26, 72): 'Most white settlers believed that the Great Zimbabwe constructions were built by ancient Phoenicians [...]. The Lemba with their Semitic customs and Judaising habits fitted this historical vision admirably and their identification as Jews [...] suited the imperial needs of the British'.

<sup>55</sup> For the use Le Roux makes of these four authors, cf. Le Roux 2003: 18, 30n30, 34, 35, 36, 40, 47, 48, 61, 62, 67, 68, 69, 83, 85, 96, 124, 154, 194. At times, that use is unfortunate as when she writes that 'cultural mixing and genetic miscegenation with the native populations' could have taken place when Semitic traders first made contact with the coast of East Africa (Le Roux 2003: 34).

<sup>56</sup> Bent's research in the early 1890s was sponsored by Cecil Rhodes. He attributed Great Zimbabwe to Phoenician builders in his *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (1895). Cf. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/zimbabwe.html>

<sup>57</sup> Rhodes appointed Hall as conservator of Great Zimbabwe, to which he caused immense damage in 1902-1903 by destroying much evidence through 'clearing rubble'. Hall attributed Great Zimbabwe to 'more civilized races' than Africans in his *Great Zimbabwe* (1905) and *Pre-historic Rhodesia* (1909).

<sup>58</sup> He wrote *The Arab Builders of Zimbabwe* (1969). I have no further information on this author.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Gayre (1905-1996) was a Scottish physical anthropologist, trained at Edinburgh, who became a Lieutenant Colonel in the Educational Corps of the British Army, and purchased the feudal Barony of Lochoreshyre. He was Professor of Anthropology and Head of the Post-Graduate Department of Anthro-geography in

As a staunch supporter of Afrikaner *apartheid*,<sup>60</sup> Mathivha gained choice means for strengthening LCA and for developing its Judaising activities when Vendaland was instituted as a Bantustan with its own 'black university' in 1973. Mathivha was appointed Professor of African Languages in it, and also served for some time as the vice-principal of that university.<sup>61</sup> These positions allowed him and LCA to follow the

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the University of Saugor, India. He strongly held that the concept of race as biologically inherited should be the central focus in study of Anthropology. He founded *The Mankind Quarterly* in 1961 in order to reunify biology and anthropology and study the interactions between biological and cultural diversity, for both 'can only be understood as the outcomes of evolutionary, ecological, and historic processes' (<http://www.mankindquarterly.org/about.html> ; cf. also <http://jtl.org/links/gayre.html> ; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mankind\\_Quarterly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mankind_Quarterly) . Gayre was a staunch supporter of *apartheid* and paid regular visits to South Africa and Rhodesia. He published an article on [Great] 'Zimbabwe' in 1965 in *The Mankind Quarterly* 5, 4: 212-243; another in 1967 on 'The Lemba or Venda of Vendaland', also in *The Mankind Quarterly* 8 (1967): 3-15; and *The Origin of the Zimbabwean Civilisation* (Salisbury: Galaxy) in 1972. During his retirement in Edinburgh, he maintained ties with British neo-nazi organisations such as the National Front (cf. <http://www.ferris.edu/ISAR/archives/billig/chapter3.htm> )

<sup>60</sup> As LCA President, Mathivha advised Afrikaners on several occasions to maintain their own identity and cultural heritage (Le Roux 2003: 27).

<sup>61</sup> It was established as University College of the North with three faculties under the trusteeship of UNISA in 1959 under the provisions of the 1959 Extension of University Education Act that barred black students from white universities and created 'tribal' and 'racial' colleges for non-white students. UNISA granted it full university status in 1969. In 1970, it began to operate as the black University of the North (UNIN) with five faculties: Economics & Administration; Arts; Education; Maths & Natural Sciences; and Theology. Its student population was strongly inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement with student leaders such as Frank Chikane, Abraham Tiro, and Cyril Ramaphosa. The white management of the university sought to curtail their activities. In 1974, the University of the North became the University of [the Bantustan] Vendaland with eight faculties. Its first black Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Kgware was installed in 1977. His successor, Prof. Mokgokong (1980-1989) pursued an Africanisation programme. The next three Vice-Chancellors were Prof Chabani Manganyi (1989-1992), Prof. Ndebele (1992-????), and Prof. Minyuku (????-1999?) who resigned after a short term of office because of tensions with the staff. By that time, Vendaland had been reabsorbed into South Africa, and the university was renamed University of the North (UNIN), be it without its earlier 'racial' restriction to black students. Under a Ministerial appointed Administrator (2001- 2002) and Prof. Mokgalong as Acting Principal (2003-2005), UNIN reduced its faculties to three: Humanities; Management Sciences & Law; and Sciences, Health & Agriculture. In

developments in respect of the Falasha, or Beta Israel, in Ethiopia closely, such as when they were recognised as Jews by the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbis in 1973 and 1975, and when some 10.000 of them were airlifted from war and famine-struck Ethiopia to Israel in 1984, 1991 and 1992 by the Israeli army.<sup>62</sup>

LCA leadership showed considerable political astuteness and pragmatism during the *apartheid* era. It deemed it not 'politically correct' during the anti-*apartheid* struggle to pursue a policy of vigorous emphasis on Lemba distinctiveness as 'Jews' for fear of being associated with 'a race with a white identity'. It refrained therefore also from claiming a 'homeland' for the Lemba and preferred the Lemba to be perceived 'as Sothos, Vendas, or whoever' (221-222). But in the late 1980s, towards the end of that era, they seized the opportunity to attend the conferences on the Falashas which Jewish organisations and universities in South Africa organised and began to divulge that the Lemba too were 'black Jews', and to assert that the Lemba and Falasha had migrated together from Yemen and so were of the same Jewish ancestry (52, 70-72, 74, 100, 106, 156).<sup>63</sup>

At one of these conferences they met with Tudor Parfitt, by then well-known for his research on the Falasha,<sup>64</sup> and invited him to include the Lemba in his research on 'Judaising' movements.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the incipient contacts with white South African Jewry emerging from these conferences enabled LCA to begin to introduce the Lemba as black fellow Jews to the white Jews of South Africa through an article in the journal

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2005 it fused with the School of Medicine, MEDUNSA, near Pretoria, to form the University of Limpopo (<http://www.unorth.ac.za/About/about-ulturf.html>).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. <http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/judaism/falash.html>

<sup>63</sup> As L.C. Thompson had already proposed in 1942 and Harald von Sicard in 1952 (Le Roux 2003: 52; cf. *supra* note 52).

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Parfitt 1985.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/parfitt.html>.

*Jewish Affairs*<sup>66</sup> in 1989 by Samuel E. Moeti, the current LCA President.<sup>67</sup> LCA followed this up with Mathivha's book on the Lemba in 1992,<sup>68</sup> and began using the LCA annual conferences for reforming Lemba 'Judaism' after the model of modern world Jewry.

After the demise of *apartheid* and the re-absorption of the Venda 'homeland' into the Republic of South Africa in 1993 - 1994, LCA set out to seek closer links with world Jewry. It got in touch by a letter with Rabbi David Marciano Ben Yishai in 1997. He declared that the Lemba were Jews and should be treated as such by Jewish institutions worldwide (66).<sup>69</sup> LCA invited South African Rabbis in 1998 to attend its annual conference (212). And it got in touch with Kulanu<sup>70</sup> and its local 'activist', Rufina Mausebaum.<sup>71</sup> As a result, Parfitt noted in a TV interview on his 'discovery' of the 'Black Jews of Southern Africa', by 2000 the LCA-led Lemba had already become 'completely different from the Lemba that I first met when I started on my journey several years ago', in 1985. And he added: 'And as we speak, some North American Jews are arriving among the Lemba of South Africa on a two-year mission to bring them mainstream Judaism, complete with a library and with Torah scrolls and everything else. So as a result of my work, though it was in no sense intended, they have become, if you like, 'properly Jewish and are recognized as such by quite a number of people, particularly in America.'<sup>72</sup>

White South African Jews, however, were more hesitant and reluctant to welcome the LCA Lemba in their midst. However, before Mathivha's death

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<sup>66</sup> *Jewish Affairs* is 'an upmarket quarterly journal', published by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. It 'features articles of cultural and communal interest' (<http://shemayisrael.co.il/sa/sajbd/sajbd.htm#Jewish%20press>).

<sup>67</sup> Moeti 1989.

<sup>68</sup> Mathivha 1992.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Le Roux 2003: 66.

<sup>70</sup> On Kulanu cf *supra* note 26.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. 'The Lemba and me' in <http://www.haruth.com/JewishLemba.html>.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/parfitt2.html>.

in 2002, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies decided to meet with the leadership of the Lemba tribe after renewed approaches by the Lemba Cultural Association and 'address all their concerns'. But the national president of the South African Board of Deputies, Mervyn Smith, emphasized that it was not within the Board's jurisdiction to enter into halachic issues, that is to decide whether or not the Lemba were Jews. That was a matter for the rabbinate. But the head of the South African Beth Din, Rabbi Moshe Kurtstage, declared at once that the local rabbinate could not rule on the status of the Lemba, because 'it is an international rabbinical problem; they have to consult the Chief Rabbis of Israel'.

Mathivha expressed disappointment at the lack of the acceptance of the Lemba by the Jewish community of South Africa. He declared that 'he and other Lemba would be prepared to reconvert to Judaism, like Ethiopian Jews, "because it would confirm what our forefathers had to say.'<sup>73</sup>

This history of this late 20th century LCA invention of the tradition that Lemba have been black children of Abraham since pre-exilic times demonstrates that an identity construct is not, as Le Roux imagines, a stable, time-honoured, monolithic tradition of two millennia, but a dynamic, pragmatic, short term process with an explicit political intent, which may, or may not, be successful, but by means of which LCA aims to achieve considerable economic, cultural and religious advantages for itself and the Lemba who join the LCA bandwagon. But LCA Judaisation was certainly not the only identity option for the Lemba, now or in the past.

### **Other identity options**

As most likely the descendants from marriages between foreign traders and local wives at some time, or at different times, Lemba were engaged in the last millennium at first mainly as middlemen in the trade between the indigenous communities and the centres of foreign trade on the coast, e.g. Sofala, and on the river Zambezi, e.g. Sena. Trade, however, scattered them, and as such Lemba have had two major options of identity construction at their disposal in the past three centuries: that of constructing a measure of distinctiveness and aloofness from the native

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<sup>73</sup> As reported in *The Scribe*, a South African Jewish journal, without further information about place of publication, volume number, issue number, and date of publication at <http://www.dangoor.com/72page25.html>

communities when their middlemen trade flourished, and that of merging into the local population when trade collapsed and they became sedentary in different places.

That they did regularly opt for the latter option is documented by data Le Roux presents in her book, e.g. when she writes that many Lemba are 'traditionalists' committed to the cult of the ancestors (122, 131); that most Lemba have become Christians (131); that Lemba who had not attended LCA conferences were not aware that they were 'Jews' (151); that many Lemba intermarry with non-Lemba (89) and are not circumcised (166); and that those who are do not link it with the Jewish idea of a covenant with God (149, 167), nor link the *ngoma lugundu* to the Ark of the Covenant (126, 155). Most of Le Roux's interviewees also rejected emphatically the suggestion that Lemba had been Muslims in the past (44, 74, 236-237).

The policy of maintaining a measure of distinctiveness and aloofness has, however, also been practised by some Lemba communities in the past for shorter or longer periods, as it is practiced now again by LCA 'Black Jews' Lemba, and by the few Varembe in the Mberengwa area of Zimbabwe who have 'reconverted' to (Indian) Islam. In earlier times the motive to maintain some measure of segregation from the local communities was probably the need to mark and maintain their position as middlemen in the trade between the interior and the trading towns on the coast and the river Zambezi. In the last two centuries, and in particular in recent decades, however, the inspiration for constructing cultural boundaries between 'Lemba' and 'non-Lemba' was found pragmatically in the profits to be gained by adopting the Muslim or Jewish identity others had invented for 'the Lemba' in the Southern African arena of identity construction. By crowning that adoption by a 're-conversion' to Lemba 'original' Islam or Judaism, the converts hoped not only to be welcomed 'back' warmly into the Muslim or Jewish global community of their reputed co-believers, but also to be entitled to considerable assistance from it, just as Lemba had enjoyed in the 19th and 20th centuries on becoming Christians. History, in Southern Africa and elsewhere, abundantly shows that religion and economic rationality are not at odds.

### **In conclusion**

Le Roux studied the Lemba as an OT scholar. It was essential for her to believe the LCA claim that the Lemba had continued to cultivate an

Israelite identity since their migration from Yemen, for on that claim rested the very possibility, purpose, and utility of her comparative study of premonarchic Israel and Lemba culture as it was being developed then by LCA. Le Roux's book demonstrates amply that the LCA claim became a constraining perspective for her. Though she did perceive some aspects of LCA politics of identity construction, she seems not to have understood that Lemba 'Jewish' culture, as proposed by LCA, was but a recent, highly pragmatic and political group identity reconstruction,<sup>74</sup> and not a hallowed one the Lemba had maintained for two millennia. Lemba live in 'a world of fragmented identities' (14) as much as we do, and they did so also in the past.<sup>75</sup>

The question is not, therefore, whether the LCA Lemba *are* the Black Jews of Southern Africa. Ethnographically, they are, for they have invented this tradition for themselves and present the Lemba in the modern arena of group identity construction as having been Jews for two millennia. Historically, there is, however, no proof that they *were* Jews for two millennia. The evidence Le Roux presents rather shows, as I have demonstrated, that 'Lemba' Jewish identity is a recent invention of tradition by LCA.<sup>76</sup> In inventing it LCA repeats what Deuteronomist historiography did for pre-monarchic Israel, as Le Roux saw (114, 240-242) well. But LCA invents it for the purpose of gaining for itself and 'the Lemba' new multivocal hybrid spaces, local and global, in the 'dynamic switchboard of cultures'<sup>77</sup> that Southern Africa was in the past as much as it and the globalising, increasingly cosmopolitan world are now.

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<sup>74</sup> Which traits LCA cleverly masked by introducing the 'Enemy within', a trope that allows it to present the Lemba as passive victims of multicultural society rather than active agents in the modern arena of identities. On the new identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa, cf. also Hamilton 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Ranger (1993: 247-248) on the colonial misconception of 'the realities of pre-colonial Africa': 'there rarely existed in fact the closed corporate consensual system which came to be accepted as characteristic of "traditional" Africa' in colonial time. 'Far from there being a single "tribal" identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities'.

<sup>76</sup> Le Roux (2003: 237) is aware that 'the invention of traditions by colonialist Europeans for the Lemba and other African communities did in fact distort [...] the pre-colonial identity of such communities', but fails to apply this to LCA.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Wendl & Rösler 1999: 1-2, 10.

To grasp these processes of cultural and religious proliferation, scholars of the religions of Africa need to purge from their research and teaching the colonial concepts of societies, cultures and religions as the systematically ordered, ethnically pure, territorially bounded communities with stable and unambiguous identities shared unreservedly by all their members. They need to enter, as anthropologists have done recently,<sup>78</sup> into the study of the numerous conflicting interstitial domains of societies full of paradox, fuzziness, and ambiguity in order to discover the opportunities these present for mixing, crisscrossing, crossing-over<sup>79</sup> and merging, as well as for the construction of segregating identities, whichever is deemed more profitable. As overt pragmatism is, however, regarded as unseemly, it is always neatly hidden behind historical, cultural and/or metaphysical 'imperatives'.

Lastly, it is pertinent to remark that the mixing and merging of some often provokes others, who feel threatened by this 'cultural dilution', to combat this 'Enemy within' by the invention of a 'tradition' of segregation that revises whatever mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion were available in the (often mythical) past and devises additional ones. By focussing only on LCA strategy of segregation Le Roux has shown one side of the coin only. In this article I have attempted to show the other side also.

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. Rösler & Wendl 1999.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. also Wendl & Rösler 1999: 11.

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