

Discovering Jews in Southern Africa: A Critical Approach to the Comparative Method

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Abstract

This article addresses the usefulness of the comparative method. By introducing two case studies specific to southern Africa, the comparison of the Zulu and Lemba to the ancient Israelite practice of Judaism, the author is able to explore the dynamics of power relations, politics, identity and space. These dynamics are further pursued by attempting to gain a greater understanding of the situations by looking at each case study from as many perspectives as possible. The concluding remarks focus on the inherent problems of the comparative method itself in an attempt to determine its effectiveness.

Introduction

And He will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather together the scattered of Judah from the four corners of the earth (Isaiah 11:12). This gathering of scattered Israel has been, and continues to be, a topic of great interest to theologians and historians of religion. However, the intrigue that surrounds this mysterious myth equally fascinates the casual observer and believer in Biblical lore. One could argue that interest in this myth of the Lost Ten Tribes reached its climax on the various colonial frontiers during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Originating from these contact zones are rich and vivid tales describing the ‘discovery’ of a ‘tribe’ whose societal structures, taboos, and oral traditions have left their ‘discoverers’ with little alternative than to conclude that they have found one of the dispersed Hebrew tribes. How were these conclusions reached? What methods and what evidence were used

in order to claim such conjectures as fact? A study seeking to answer only these two questions would be interesting in its own right however this essay wishes to peer beyond the Western perspective and raise equally, if not more, enlightening awareness from the often forgotten and overlooked viewpoints of the indigenous people themselves. How did they feel about being compared and linked with an ancient Middle Eastern tradition whose modern emanation has been continually persecuted and “ghettoized” (Chidester 1996: 125)? On the other hand, what would the ancient Hebrew or modern Jew think about being classified with such ‘primitive’ and ‘pagan’ cultures? With this multi-perspective approach forming its foundation this article will build itself around examining and analyzing the comparative conclusions that connect ancient and modern Judaism with these traditional religions.

In order to reach the heart of the issues at hand this essay will explore and examine two case studies specific to southern Africa. The first section will focus on the colonial discovery of the “Jews of Natal” and will discuss the myths, rituals, and symbols that led missionaries, government agents, and even Zulu individuals to reach the comparative conclusion that the Zulu must have originated from ancient Israel. The second section will bring to light the curious development of comparison amongst the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa. While this people’s comparative Judaic roots are firmly planted in the past their self identification is applicable, and has even intensified, here in the present. The concluding sections will flush out the comparative dynamics of power relations, politics, economics, tradition, identity, and space that both of these case studies have hinted at and will find completion in a critical discussion of the comparative method itself. It must be noted that this paper is written from a religious studies perspective and while it attempts to provide the reader with an interesting account of the comparisons that have been made linking the Zulu and Lemba with the Jews, both ancient and modern, its real goal is to answer the following question: Are scholars of religious studies justified in applying the comparative method in their findings and if so, what is the most objective way of doing so?

The Zulu

One of the first instances of Jewish discovery in Southern Africa occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century on the Zulu frontier. Chidester’s informative text, *Savage Systems*, points out that during the early stages, when the frontier was riddled with battles and ‘uncontrolled’ natives, no religion was to be found amongst the Zulu, or any other South African tribe for that matter (Chidester 1996: 120). However, as the colonial government gradually gained control, religious views and comprehensive systems of belief were all of the sudden ‘discovered’. This discovery ultimately led to missionaries, travellers and government officials

producing large amounts of material on these traditional forms of worship. Chidester contextualizes these broadly termed colonial writings by stating, "If the discovery of a religion depended upon conquest and containment, the analysis of its nature or character emerged out of localized practices of comparison and generalization" (1996: 26-27). These seminal attempts at studying religion were so fraught with preconceived notions and prejudice that little attempt was made at admiring the traditions for what they were: unique systems of worship that held together the fabric of each society. From the perspective of the modern student of religion, these assumptions and comparisons are regarded as biased and uneducated attempts at 'inventing' and 'discovering' aspects of culture that fit handily into a preconceived Judaeo-Christian mould. Those aspects of the tradition that did not fit into this schema were unceremoniously tossed by the wayside to make room for the much improved and evolved monotheism of Christianity, Islam or Judaism. From the perspective of the student, these reports are fallacious and led to many of the atrocities that have been committed in the name of religion, such as the apartheid system. But is this the whole story? What other viewpoints and perspectives can we look at to add to our reservoir of knowledge? Let us begin by viewing the situation from the native's perspective and see where that leads us.

The great missionary, Henry Callaway, recorded many Zulu myths and folktales which he published in a six volume series between 1866 and 1868. One legend in particular is pertinent to this study, *Ulangalassenhla Nolangalaszantsi* (Callaway 1866-1868: 89-96). The myth, the length of which is too great to reproduce in full here, is about a man, Ulangalaszantsi, whose children have been taken captive by a far off chieftain, Ulangalassenhla. Ulangalaszantsi journeys the great distance to the land of his rival. During his trip he is required to sacrifice ten different oxen in order to cross ten different rivers which "open" each time an ox is "cast" in, allowing him safe passage across. Upon completion of the long journey, Ulangalaszantsi rests for a period of three days in the home of his daughter, of whom he recognized and confided his identity to. With the period of rest complete, Ulangalaszantsi reveals his true nature to the Chief and the Chief responds with an edict to his army, "Kill Ulangalaszantsi. I refuse to give up the children" (1866-1868: 92-93). The army hurls spears that never reach their target and in a tauntingly humble manner, Ulangalaszantsi gathers the spears and allows the soldiers a second attempt. Failing to kill his enemy, Ulangalassenhla admits defeat and allows the children to leave with their rightful father stating, "Behold the children of your people. So go in peace" (1866-1868: 93). This, of course, was not to be the case and as soon as Ulangalaszantsi and his children were out of sight the Chief retracted his words and sent his army to slaughter both Ulangalaszantsi as well as the children. The flight is recorded in this manner, "Ulangalaszantsi and his children at length came to a river whose waters

were red; it was very great: they found it very much flooded. Ulangalaszantsi raised his royal rod; he raised it, and the river was stayed, and they all passed over" (1866-1868: 93). The army, in hot pursuit soon reached the flooded river and Ulangalaszantsi again "raised his rod" and parted the waters to allow his pursuers to cross, but "when they were all in the river, he dropped his rod, and the river overwhelmed them all" (1866-1868: 94). The tale does not end with this victory but goes on to speak of Ulangalaszantsi's death, as well as the death of the other older men in the company, before reaching his homeland. The myth's final paragraph reads, "This is an old tale amongst our people. It is called a myth, because they who used to tell it passed away a very long time ago; and it is no longer known whence it was derived. But it is said that it was an old legend, even before the white men came to this country" (1866-1868: 95).

The similarities between this legend and that of Moses freeing the children of Israel from an Egyptian Pharaoh are striking and obvious on so many levels. Callaway was not unaware of this as he noted, "Whatever may have been the origin of this tale, there are few who will not at once refer it to the history of Moses and Pharaoh" (1866-1868: 95). He then records some possible dates of early contact between Christian and native as well as similar folk legends among the Hottentots. Citing W.H.I. Bleek's hypothesis of the North African origins of the Hottentot language, Callaway concludes that "It may not, therefore be unreasonably surmised that they brought this tradition with them from their former home; and have imparted it to the Kafirs" (1866-1868: 96). In other words, Callaway is stating that he believes, based on the knowledge available at the time, that this Zulu myth was not of antiquity and was an adaptation of the Israelite myth it so closely resembles. He believes that it was either brought to the Zulus by early contact with Christians or Hottentots, but leaves no room for a conclusion that the myth might actually be of Zulu origin. What can be learned from the retelling of a myth which clearly states it was derived before "the white men came?" Are we to follow the example of Callaway and suggest alternative origins or can one cite this myth as evidence in support of the Jewish ancestry of the Zulus? Before drawing any conclusion let us explore further the Zulu mind during this time.

James Stuart, magistrate and linguist (Chidester 1996: 116), recorded much of the ethnographic material that scholars have cited when probing the native perspective in regards to religion and origination (Chidester 1996; le Roux 2003). The interviews which he conducted and recorded reveal much on this matter. When questioning an elderly Zulu, Dinya, Stuart records the elder's interest in solidifying the origins of his people, "We are anxious to find out where we came from. These Jewish customs of ours are evidence that we came from the north, for this evidence was in existence before we came in contact with the Europeans" (Webb & Wright 1976: 98). Dinya is not Stuart's only case subject to be found with this interest in mind.

Lazarus Mxaba (note the Christian name) was an employee of the government official, Theophilus Shepstone, who had travelled to England and in the process had become well educated by Western standards, for he could speak English, Zulu, Dutch and Basuto (Webb & Wright 244, 245). Mxaba was interested in the many similarities that could be found between the traditions of ancient Israel, which he knew about from his reading of the Old Testament, and those of the Zulu. Mxaba believed that he could reconstruct the history of the Zulus by studying the history and customs of ancient Judaism (Chidester 1996: 118). The voices of Dinya and Mxaba, as recorded by Stuart, lead us to believe that there was, at this time, some fervour amongst the Zulus to reach the conclusion that they might have Semitic roots. The implications of this belief and frame of mind are interesting and will be discussed presently but first let us delve deeper into the European perspective which can be found in comments made by Stuart as well missionaries such as R.C.A. Samuelson and Bishop John W. Colenso.

Although Stuart's recordings of his conversations are quite thorough, his own notes and comments often overshadow the ideas being presented by the individual being interviewed. For instance, in speaking to Mxaba, Stuart records his lengthy response to the question of the European mentality to make all natives subservient:

I replied that, as far as I can see, the policy is to rule both European and native in an equitable way, for our Government is broad-based upon the maxim 'Do as you would be done by'. But the natural desire is undoubtedly to make the natives subservient to our ideals which, because they are similar to those of the many kingdoms which comprise Christendom, we believe to be truer than those of the natives. Ages ago we cast aside ideals similar to those natives now possess for those of Christianity. (Webb & Wright 1976: 243)

This comment should have elicited much response from his guests of which little is recorded, suggesting that the men did, in fact, view Christianity as the next logical step in the evolutionary process. Perhaps Stuart's most intriguing comment which will be analyzed later is, "Fancy, the Zulu can claim to be related only to the Jews; they are in great distress; how can they expect the Jews, themselves in misery, to help and deliver them?" (Webb & Wright 1976: 263).

Stuart is not the only early source of material and as Chidester and le Roux note, Henry Francis Fynn, who wrote in the 1820s, concluded that many of the practices and rituals of the Zulus coincided well within a Jewish framework (Chidester 1996: 126; le Roux 2003:21). The two missionaries, Samuelson and Colenso, each had much to say about Zulu ancestry and the roots of their religious beliefs. Samuelson, after quoting at length from Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*,

provides thirty-four specific traditions found amongst the Zulu for which he finds evidence in the Old Testament (Samuelson 1929: 325-351). He goes as far as to suggest that the Zulus are descendants of the Ethiopians (of which he apparently is not referring specifically to geography but to “black faces”) who were conquered by Moses and the Israelites (1929: 325).

John Colenso was ordained the Bishop of Natal in 1853 (Chidester 1996: 129; Parfitt 2002: 219) and immediately began a very thorough investigation of Zulu religious belief. His main contribution for the purposes of this examination is his conclusion that the two most important names and descriptions of the Zulu God, *uNkulunkulu* and *umVelinqansi*, could be equated perfectly with the Hebrew equivalents, *Elohim* and *Jehovah* respectively (Chidester 1996: 135; Parfitt 2002: 219). In Colenso’s mind the “Zulu represented a living museum of ancient Israel” and it was by studying and observing their current modes of worship and ritual that scholars and theologians alike would be able to reconstruct the Old Testament way of life (Chidester 1996: 137). Colenso believed that the similarities he observed and gleaned were enough to provide a “basis for comparison” and with this view in mind he believed himself justified to produce such interesting conjectures (1996: 137).

It may be useful to summarize and explore a few of our findings thus far. From the perspectives that we have looked at one decided conclusion can be drawn. The traditional African perspective has been severely undervalued and is entirely dependent upon the colonial, missionary or traveller’s perspective. This fact is what has apparently inspired Chidester’s work, but not in an effort to find the lost voice of the native, but by comparing and offering a subtle, or perhaps not so subtle, critique of these early comparative attempts. The two native viewpoints we have found have not exactly been the most useful, as both men had no doubt been influenced by European customs and especially religion. But what about the myth mentioned above? The evidence provided by Callaway would lead us to suggest it is nothing more than a Zulu-ized version of the Jewish and Christian myth of Moses. Rationality would support this proposition; however, rationality is no longer the determining factor that it once was. I am not attempting to argue that the myth has pre-contact origins but I am arguing that it is beyond the scope of scholarship to suggest otherwise. Who are we, as students of religious studies, to determine facts based on conjecture and guess work? Let us push this argument to the side for the moment and focus on the power relations and identifying factors involved in both the Zulu and colonialist contention of Jewish ancestry.

From the indigenous perspective the ability to claim Semitic roots is a very powerful tool that can be used to build and create a cohesive and distinct national or tribal identity. This perspective will be explored more fully in our next case study of the modern Lemba, but is worth mentioning in relation to the Zulu as well. As Chidester notes in his *Religions of South Africa*, ethnic nationalism became

a banner under which the Zulu nation could come together during the apartheid regime (Chidester 1992: 211). Chief Buthelezi, who coined the concept in the 1970s, trumpeted, “It is in times of national stress that Zulu nationalism rises to its greatest heights. Our nationalism is a weapon we pick up whenever we are threatened” (1992: 212). Surely the colonialist invasion of Natal was a time of “national stress” and from the Zulu perspective it is not surprising that they came together under the banner of Judaism in order to alleviate the many pressures they faced at the hands of their Christian invaders. Claiming Jewish descent may very well have been a coping mechanism for many Zulu who felt that they would receive better treatment if they were seen in this light.

The designation of Zulu as a Jew has equal importance, if not more, to the colonialist. From this perspective, the Zulu tradition falls into the category of recognizable religious practices while simultaneously being shepherded into a religious tradition that has experienced paralyzing affects at the hands of many Christians. This categorization is a way of reinforcing the belief that Christianity is the superior religion of the world and that it has the right to determine the fate of the other lesser religions. Chidester puts it coyly, “But the crucial factor in this identification of the Zulu as ancient Israelites seemed to lie in the assumption that Jews could be contained, and perhaps even ghettoized, under a system of Christian rule” (Chidester 1996: 125). Therefore, while the Zulus were coming together under the banner of Judaism, the colonialists were using the same banner to force them into subservience. Stuart’s comment, quoted earlier, now has added meaning. It will be remembered that he found it puzzling why the Zulu would want to be associated with a group of people who had been controlled and maliciously treated for many years. It is clear that from both perspectives, the traditional African as well as the European colonialist’s, the dynamics of power, politics and identity were some of the main motivating factors behind the comparative approach being undertaken at this time. A further case study will bring to light more of the dynamics involved as well as enhance the ones we have already mentioned.

The Lemba

There has been a lot of recent interest in the claims of Jewish ancestry by the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa. Interest skyrocketed when genetic testing concluded that the Lemba could have plausibly, in accordance with their oral traditions, descended from the ancient Israelite nation (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 57). The works of Tudor Parfitt, Magdel le Roux and Gina Buijs have speculated on these Jewish origins and provide fresh academic perspectives on this comparative approach. The Lemba claims are similar to those of the Zulu insiders cited above, however, the situation is different due to the fact that these claims are current and

are still held by the group as a whole. The Zulu case, on the other hand, seems to have dwindled with time (at least it has not been a topic of any recent research to my knowledge). Since the Lemba still believe and insist upon their own Jewish origins, scholars and researchers are able to have direct contact with them which results in a markedly different manner of study, one that is not dependant upon conjecture and quick labels.

Parfitt, in his work *Journey to the Vanished City*, draws some interesting conclusions from his experience amongst the Lemba. He states, "It is altogether curious that widely scattered Lemba communities, which had no contact with each other and did not even know of each other's existence, should have come to such similar conclusions about their ancestry" (Parfitt 1992: 255). The Lemba, unlike the Zulu during first contact, who had more or less come together under Shaka's flag, are a scattered people throughout South Africa and Zimbabwe. In South Africa they are mostly linked and grouped with the Venda of the Northern Province, however, they believe in their distinct roots and even though they share the language of the larger groups which surround them, they hold to the 'insider' fact that they are 'the beautiful people,' with light skin and fine (not so large and flat) noses (Buijs 1998: 665). I emphasized the word 'insider' because according to researchers like Parfitt "no general evidence of any clear difference in skin colour or physiognomy between Venda and Lemba" can be found to an 'outsider' (Buijs 1998: 665). This belief is so deeply entrenched in Lemba ideology and their sense of identity that even Rudo Mathivha, the daughter of Professor Mathivha, one of the more prominent members of the community (1998: 664), who is a doctor herself, believes that her 'tribe's' skin is "paler" than the skin of her neighbour's (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 66).

Historical accounts of Lemba contact with missionaries, travellers and writers are similar to those recorded about the Zulu above. These writings emphasize Lemba endogamy, rituals, appearance and ability to retain their customs while sharing their space with groups of people who hold to very different beliefs and traditions (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 55; Buijs 1998: 666-667). One traveller and adventurer, Carel Birkby, pointed to a further curious trait of "Paul Kruger's Jews" when he calls attention to them in the 1930s as "itinerant pedlars like the early Jewish 'smouses' in South Africa" (Buijs 1998: 672-673). This is the first reference, as far as I can tell, to the economic similarities between Jews and the native African's who claim to be such. This proposition does not seem to have much validity when put under the microscope, as the claim of the Lemba is that they are descendants of the ancient Jews who were more or less pastoral and farming people and not the common stereotype of working as merchants, which developed much later from the peculiar beliefs of Christianity.

It is uncertain as to when the Lemba first claimed to be of Jewish descent from the scholarly perspective. Parfitt believes it is a "relatively recent" declaration and

that it might have been the “alchemy of colonialism” suggesting a change in “ethnic identity which served their master’s ends as well as their own” (Parfitt 1992: 254-255). The change, from a form of Islam to Judaism, was subject to environmental conditions such as the political struggles of apartheid where “Jewish blood was better than black blood” (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 56). Buijs believes that “in the face of struggle” the Lemba joined together to form a unique “ethnic identity” and “ethnic self-esteem” that echoed another group of people experiencing similar conditions (Buijs 1998: 663). Parfitt adds to this conversation,

In certain cases it is the exclusivity of Judaism that exerts a certain fascination; and in other instances the historical experience and suffering of Jewish people serve as a powerful magnet and as a usable framework to explain and make more bearable their own suffering or to use when their own identity is under siege. (le Roux 2003: 17-18)

These are not the only answers that scholars are proposing. Le Roux claims that, “The consensus of opinion among all the researchers who have studied this people seriously, has been that there are Semitic elements in their ancestry” (le Roux 2003: 60). What is even more interesting and contradictory of the claims of Buijs and Parfitt is that the Lemba share very little in common with modern Judaism. Their oral and ritual traditions reflect the events and practices of ancient Israel and not the modern mode of Jewish worship (le Roux 2003: 15). In fact, a most unexpected finding, the vast majority of Lemba are practicing Christians, most often of the Dutch Reformed and Lutheran persuasions (le Roux 2003: 239; Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 53; Buijs 1998). Le Roux argues that much of the success of the Christian missionaries is due to the “close relationship with the traditions, practices and lifestyle preached in the Bible” (le Roux 2003: 236).

It may be worthwhile to mention here one scholar’s, though he is not alone in his deduction, slightly different conclusion in regard to the identity of the Lemba. N.J. van Warmelo, in his ethnographic descriptions of the major South African indigenous groupings, felt that, despite what the Lemba claimed themselves, this people’s unique heritage would be better labelled under the religious banner of Islam and not Judaism. After citing much evidence to support his theory he writes that the Lemba are “descendants of Semitic traders from the East Coast, in other words, of Arabs” (van Warmelo 1974: 82). The usefulness of raising this issue here is that it provides a completely opposite and contradictory way of viewing the Lemba. No longer are they descendants of the great Israelite nation that forged the way for modern Christianity nor, continuing in the same vein, are they partakers of the bitter cup of exile and ghettoization. Instead they are now subject, negatively, to a group of people that made up the majority of the slave community in South Africa and, positively (or negatively depending on

ones orientation and worldview), to a rich religious tradition that staved off the invading Crusaders and who have contributed immensely to the traditional African way of life. This re-orientation of the prior conversation allows the reader to ponder the many questions that must be asked. Why did the Lemba choose to be part of the Jewish world and not the Muslim? What benefits did they gain from this choice and which did they miss out on? The reader is now asked to treat these latest queries as an aside relegated to the recesses of the subconscious as the paper returns to drawing comparative conclusions that focus on the now well established discovery of the ancient Israelite tradition in southern Africa and specifically amongst the Zulu and Lemba.

The genetic tests performed in the last fifteen years throughout Jewry have only intensified interest in the Lemba. The tests were published in 1996 by Spurdle and Jenkins and confirmed that the “genetic evidence turned out to be consistent with the oral tradition of the Lemba” (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 57). What do these findings actually mean to the Lemba? From the Lemba perspective it confirms what they have always believed to be true. In their view they should now be accepted into *Kelal Israel* (the family of Israel) just as the Ethiopian Jews (Falasha or Beta Israel) were. Interestingly enough, this acceptance has not occurred. Why not? The answer lies in the perspective of the, perhaps forgotten, element which has been the consistent denominator in both case studies: the Jewish perspective.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz in his work *The Savage in Judaism* provides a lens from which to view the situation from the Jewish perspective. The picture he paints is very interesting. It will come as no surprise that from the Jewish perspective (Eilberg-Schwartz reminds us that this is not a constant or unified perspective but one that is always shifting, adapting and changing) it is an insult to be grouped with these aboriginal societies (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 2-3). However, Eilberg-Schwartz’s argument is that they in fact do share a large amount in common and from an anthropological perspective much can be learned about Judaism by studying such societies (1990: 3). This is of course the current or modern stream of thought which only began to take shape during the latter half of the twentieth century due to monumental works by Mary Douglas (1966) and Edmund Leach (1969). Prior to this time anthropological studies had to deal with a problem: how does one allow for the similarities between inferior primitive religions and the superior form of Judaism which sprouted Christianity, the greatest of all religions? Eilberg-Schwartz notes that many scholars did, in fact, make tentative comparisons but frequently noted the superiority and advanced condition of Judaism (1990: 9). The common frame of mind at this time would argue, “Primitive societies were living fossils, relics of a distant past which European culture had long ago transcended” (1990: 19). This anthropological perspective seems in contradiction to many of the observations made by the writers we have quoted thus far. However, it might be remembered that James Stuart’s personal comments

were very much in line with these early anthropologists and as for many of the other individuals referenced above, most of them were not academics and thus were under no obligation or previous prejudice to follow the codes and strictures of these scholarly approaches.

Returning to the Jewish viewpoint which is our current interest, let us explore the more modern responses to the Lemba situation. Buijs refers to a newspaper article published in 1986 (before the genetic testings) by the *Pretoria News* which proclaimed the Lemba belief in their Jewish roots (Buijs 1998: 661-662). In response to this article the reporter found an Israeli diplomat who commented, "We need it like a hole in the head" (1998: 662). What was the Jewish response after the genetic results were published? It appears that from an Orthodox perspective the Lemba are not legally considered Jews and must convert like any other individual not of Jewish descent (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 81). This response is obviously troublesome to many of the Lemba, who see no point in having to convert as they believe, and now have scientific evidence to support, that they are Israelites by birth and heritage. They argue that the Ethiopian Jews were accepted even though genetic testing concluded that they were not of literal descent (2006: 83).

In the eyes of South African Jews the issue is more than just science and claims to heritage; it is a social one as well. One Orthodox Rabbi commented that, "People would say, 'Hey who has brought his gardener to Shul' and jokes like that" (2006: 81). This Rabbi concluded that, "It is unrealistic to think that the divisions and barriers which existed in the past and still exist will disappear immediately" (2006: 82). He suggests that even if the Lemba wanted to be converted they would have to do it somewhere outside of South Africa (2006: 82). This Rabbi's voice is not the only one echoing these sentiments (2006: 83-88). Even Reformed Rabbi's believe that accepting such a large group into the community would cause disruption (2006: 83). However, other Jews have reached out to the Lemba and have attempted to incorporate them into *Kelal Israel*, but most of these efforts have come from individuals outside of South Africa, most frequently from the United States (2006: 62). These attempts have not met with great success as most Lemba channel their Jewish faith through Christianity and the Jewish attempts to alter this and focus their practices in the fashion of modern Judaism have failed (le Roux 2003: 237).

Comparative Conclusions

Up to this point we have looked at the comparison of southern African traditional practices to Judaism from the multiple perspectives of the Zulu, the Lemba, colonialists (and other travellers and writers of the period), academics, anthropologists and Jews. Each perspective has offered this study interesting and

different material and viewpoints from which to proceed. We have also mentioned and briefly explored the various dynamics that have arisen from this comparison as well as those discovered through glimpsing the situation from these differing perspectives. Our objective from here is to address these dynamics and discuss their implications on the two case studies mentioned. Exploring power relations, identity, space and the comparative method in general, will occupy the remainder of this paper.

Power and politics seem to be one of the driving forces behind both the traditional perspective's claim to Jewish heritage as well as the discovering of such by colonialists and governments. Parfitt sees these comparative conclusions as falling tidily into the much sought after quest for the "Lost Ten Tribes of Israel" (Parfitt 2002). Parfitt's study points to similar comparisons and conclusions in nearly every corner of the globe and more importantly he finds that this quest was an essential aspect of the colonial spirit that infected the great nations of the earth. He goes even further to suggest that the driving force behind these attempts at discovery was power and more specifically the power to control history and histories (2002: 26-27).

Getting back to our case studies of the Zulu and Lemba versus the colonial powers, in the case of the Zulu, the relationship seems tilted more to the side of the colonialists and the newly established government. As mentioned above, Chidester points out that the process was a form of 'ghettoization' in which the government employed the method of comparison in order to liken their harsh treatment of the Zulu to that of the Jew of which countless justifications for mistreatment could then be found. The case of the Lemba seems to be a bit more equal as the Lemba were able to draw upon their belief in being of a 'purer' race to set themselves apart from their neighbours during the time of apartheid. It also worked well from a historical perspective because the case of the Lemba gave support to the belief that descendants of the Jews had constructed the ruined kingdom of Great Zimbabwe which most European's refused to believe could have been built by native Africans (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 54). Parfitt and Egorova comment on this mutually beneficial situation when they state,

Clearly if traces could be found of these ancient colonizers [the architects of Great Zimbabwe] it would serve this particular historical vision. The Lemba with their Semitic customs and apparently Judaic habits fitted the bill admirably and their identification as Jews thus suited imperial needs. On the other hand the great interest that missionaries and others had in their traditions in the early days of colonisation served the interests of the Lemba too; it gave them enhanced access to education and conferred other social benefits. (2006: 54)

Parfitt cannot stress this point enough and indeed, he believes that the entire reason that the early colonizers and missionaries stressed the Lemba's Semitic heritage was to serve this very purpose. Parfitt finds it noteworthy to comment on various "white racists" who cling to this idea of a group of people with "white" backgrounds as the great builders because as one woman Parfitt interviewed professed, "They [black Africans] are baboons, they do not build anything – they destroy" (Parfitt 2002: 223). However, this claim also benefited the Lemba, elevating them to a nearly "white" status and affording them many privileges, not the least of which was their newly found intellectual nature (2002: 221-225).

The power dynamics are not as clear cut as one might expect. It was a symbiotic relationship of which both sides benefited. The Zulu may have taken part in this relationship as well. Le Roux suggests that, "An oral tradition holds that the Lala section of the Zulus at the time of Shaka were Lemba people. According to this tradition they were the groups who introduced the Zulu to circumcision" (le Roux 2003: 21). Of course history has proven that they did not receive the same benefits as the Lemba but perhaps they should have. Clearly, power relations were one of the strong motivating factors in making this comparison.

Ethnic identity also plays a significant role in the acceptance of the Lemba to these claims of Jewish descent. It also played a similar role in the acceptance of educated Zulus such as Dinya and Mxaba, during the nineteenth century. The Lemba in particular have come together under this heading of ethnic identity to set themselves apart from those around them. With the formation of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) in 1947 the leaders of the community were providing a forum and pulpit from which to preach about this ethnic ideology and diversity. Buijs attended one of these conferences and found this to be the case (Buijs 1998: 677). The nationalist identity of the Zulu has already been stated and Ninian Smart in his work *Worldviews* comments on the importance of the relationship developed between religious identity and ethnic or nationalist identity by suggesting, "It is important to see how religion and worldviews are often deeply involved in the national idea; the advent of nationalism represents a new backdrop against which religious attitudes and worldviews are thrown" (Smart 1983: 49). Buijs finds this 'new backdrop' as a "twentieth-century construct" and believes that its invention was a way for intellectuals to impose ideas on the general public to help them cope and deal with changing social conditions (Buijs 1998: 663-664). If this is true it may fit with many of the conclusions found by Buijs, Parfitt, and le Roux, who all contend that the Lemba's adherence and recent excitement in regards to Judaism is culturally, ethnically, as well as politically charged (Buijs 1998: 664; Parfitt 1992: 255; le Roux 2003: 238-240). As a way of perhaps adding validity to these findings another scholar, Steven Kaplan, when studying the Ethiopian Jews we have hinted at many times before, drew very similar conclusions to their belief in their traditional Jewish heritage, "Their emergence as a distinctive

people was the result of a variety of political, economic, and ideological factors” (Kaplan 1992: 157).

According to Parfitt, however, the need and desire for a close knit ethnic identity is not exclusive to the native Africans. In fact, Parfitt claims that one of the motivating factors in the European quest to discover and conquer the world was this need to solidify their own sense of identity. In order to accomplish this, the colonizers set about reconstructing the frontier to appear eerily similar to their own native communities (2002: 26). In the words of Parfitt, “It could be said that this process of creating Jews everywhere has something to do with the ‘construction of affinities’ – creating a ubiquitous mirror image of metropolitan society” (2002: 26) In an interesting discussion of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that are inherent in any discourse on identity, Parfitt forwards the opinion that these comparative conclusions of discovering Jews almost everywhere was, in all actuality, a coping mechanism used by Europeans to maintain their own sense of self and nationalist (and perhaps religious) identity (2002: 24). As stated cited above, Parfitt allows for the African perspective as well and one concluding remark from him on the various functions of grasping at identity might prove useful:

Similarly self-identifying ‘Israelites’ may well find a life-enhancing meaning in their adopted identity and use it as a means of attacking Jews whom they see as usurpers and frauds on a gigantic scale. In other cases the designation of a group as the people of God serves a quite different function – it associates them with the prestigious, it confirms their good fortune or it may convey some material benefit, including evangelisation, education opportunities and so on. (2002: 246)

From statements like these it appears that the dynamics of identity are beneficial to both those claiming them as well as those imposing them. In much the same manner as power relations were ultimately politically coordinated it might be concluded that ethnic identity is also.

The matter of space is an interesting dynamic that forces its way through the fabric we are weaving. The colonial invasion of Zulu lands was a direct affront to space and a shared space was forcefully introduced. The Lemba have no claim to any physical space as they believe they were nomadic travellers who fled their ancient home of Sena and found themselves to be intruders in southern Africa (le Roux 2003: 25). However, the aspects and dynamics of physical space are not the only elements of the critical term that are in play here. Spatial relations in reference to time are also a determiner and a player in the way each of our groups view and perceive the world around them. Jonathan Z. Smith in his collection of

essays, *Map is not Territory*, and specifically in the article which shares the name of the collection, provides much needed insight into these spatial dimensions. Smith believes that the study of religion is a study of different maps, which we, the student or scholar, create in order to process the material we have before us (Smith 1978: 291). The use of these maps is critical to the approach of studying the various religions of the world. One is more readily able and willing to accept a tradition or group of people if they can be found on his/her map. How this applies to our current case studies is simple. When the colonialists and early missionaries landed in southern Africa they came with a well established map from which they were able to process information. Once the Zulus were in a controllable setting and a more advanced study could be undertaken of their religious beliefs and practices, these early writers looked at the map they had before them and concluded that the Zulus must have originated in Israel, as many of their points of reference (symbols, rituals and myths) pointed them in that direction. The case of the Lemba is similar, though from a different perspective. Here the Lemba had a previously constructed map from which they deduced that their points of reference were not in accordance with the other groups around them. When presented with an alternative map (from Christian missionaries) they readily recognized themselves as descendants of the ancient Israelites and were able to transcribe this new map onto the backdrop of their original one.

Time is brought into the picture when Smith goes on to explain how history is one of the most critical elements in forming a map. If one has not been confronted by certain elements before then it stands to reason that this element will not exist on his/her map. Therefore, when the Zulu and Lemba first appeared on the European maps they were considered to be "others" who had no history and thus European colonizers were challenged with the burden of discovering a history for them. Smith points out that these "ethnic" and "historical" maps have many boundaries and none so pointed as the boundary of what is "human" (Smith 1978: 294). In Smith's theory, the European invaders looked at their maps and found no reference to these people and consequently they were labelled as "non-human or invisible beings" (1978: 294). Because these groups and their religious practices had never confronted the making of European history before, these new ideas about origins and ancestry were forced onto them in order to re-humanize them. The de-humanizing mentality of early colonialists and explorers is perhaps one of the greatest contributors to our current fascination with the comparative method. Scholars such as James Frazer, who sought to classify every reference point from every map in the world onto the one standardized and accepted European map, have only aided in the current appeal to 'find' or 'discover' lost tribes of Israel in places like Africa. Modern scholars like Smith help us to re-orientate ourselves and accept the fact that every nation, every group of people and indeed, every individual possess a different map and that this is acceptable and should

not move us to de-humanize the ‘other’ in an attempt to ‘re-humanize’ them in accordance with our own map.

A discussion of ‘others’ and ‘otherness’, which has been introduced above by Smith, will aid us in the next and concluding section as we look at the very usefulness and effectiveness of the comparative method. Many scholars have devoted countless hours to unlocking the mysteries of humanity’s willingness to place their fellow humans into the two categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’. For our purposes we will only look at one of these author’s views, and although he may not be the preeminent scholar in the particular field of the ‘other’, he may very well prove to be the alpha on the subject matter we are specifically dealing with: the discovery of the ‘other’ by colonizers and the further creation of and transformation of these ‘others’ into Jews. Frequently throughout this work we have turned to Tudor Parfitt for advice and on this matter he again comes to our aid. During the years between 1880 and 1930 the European quest for world domination led them to ‘discover’, which we now know, thanks to Smith, was only a discovery to them because these people and places did not exist on their preconceived and known maps, many ‘primitive’ societies which these colonizers readily labelled as Jewish (Parfitt 2002: 26). “The European attempt to articulate these new ‘others’ became a key part of colonial discourse” (2002: 25). In Africa the challenge was enhanced by the unwillingness of many to believe that the people were even human (2002: 196). Following Smith’s example, it might be concluded that in order for the colonizers to fully ‘humanize’ these ‘others’ they first had to ‘de-humanize’ them and then create for them a history that allowed for their ‘re-humanization’. Parfitt would readily agree with this analysis as he devotes the greater part of his concluding remarks on the “Lost Ten Tribes” by emphasizing the European mechanism of creating ‘others’ that fit into a strictly Judaeo-Christian schema (2002: 248-249). In his view, our two case studies, which we initially viewed as unique, are two of the many cases in Africa and hundreds more throughout the world. In his own words,

The myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel was immensely user-friendly: it was a catch-all device for understanding unknown peoples and races and a means of labelling human entities for whom there was no available label – as for some it became a channel for the better perception of self. (2002: 247)

Parfitt’s quotation opens the door for an aside on the power of myths. For the most part we have been treating the mythic tales of the Lost Ten Tribes as well as Zulu and Lemba traditions as histories when it may be more useful to read them as myths. Myths are amoral and when confronting a myth, whether sacred, historical, or both, one is no longer concerned with truth but rather with its

efficacy in the eyes of those who perpetuate it. By reading the material presented in this essay as mythic, as opposed to historical, another perspective is added to the mix from which it can be concluded that these myths were extremely important, especially in the case of the Lemba, in providing a sense of identity, establishing power relations, and creating a history found on European maps. The power and usefulness of mythic comparisons can be seen particularly well in the reflections found here as both Zulu and Lemba clung to the myth of the Lost Ten Tribes in an effort to distance themselves from their African heritage and create an alternative sacred history.

Conclusions about Comparisons

Smith and Parfitt's insights now lead us into a critique of the comparative method itself. Their analysis of the constant need for people to discover reference points from which to begin the comparative method have already been noted and provide one of the best explanations for this seemingly inherent need. Glimpses of a critique of this method have already been found by Eilberg-Schwartz in his summary of the anthropological evolution. In short, early comparativists were concerned more with situating foreign beliefs and traditions into their own, known, standards than with appreciating the uniqueness of the cultures they were studying. This, in effect, led to a theory of the evolution of religion, where one could trace the advanced condition of Christianity and other monotheistic traditions to a grand beginning of which traditional practices greatly resembled. A study of this nature, by definition, draws countless boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and it is no wonder that early individuals such as Dinya, Mxaba and Professor Mathivha pushed for their people's advancement along the evolutionary ladder. Solving these issues of early prejudice has been one of the main topics that students of anthropology, and even religious studies, are forced to address. Clellan Ford discusses many of the factors involved when undertaking the comparative approach.

We begin with the fact that people in different societies live different lives, follow different customs, occupy different statuses and form different groupings, have different beliefs, attitudes and values. Furthermore, these lifeways vary through time from one generation to the next within the same social group. (Ford 1967: 3)

When contextualized to the two case studies under review here, we find that many of the dynamics and problems we have discussed stem from these key elements of making comparisons. These groups in southern Africa are separated by a great deal of time and space from the group to which they are being compared, and

as a result of these varying conditions one might have a difficult time making a case to pursue a study through the comparative approach. One might have a hard enough time comparing modern Judaism to its ancient predecessor or, along the same vein, the early nineteenth century Zulu to the post-apartheid, modern Zulu. As Schapera points out, “the principles (if any) that govern the selection of societies for comparison seem to be anything but scientific” (Schapera 1967: 55). It is hardly fair to assume that just because a particular group shares a few similar traits with another group that they can and should be compared.

A further problem that results from this process, with specific regard to our two case studies, is the inadequacy of the data scholars have to work with. In this paper we have seen how limited are the writings in regard to the Zulu and how narrow is the scope of information that we have at our disposal. The Zulu perspective we have presented here is not actually the perspective of an entire nation of people but is limited to the two or three informants referenced. What was the actual opinion of the majority of the Zulu of this time? Seeing as scholars have no way of producing knowledge that does not exist, an answer to such a query does not appear to be forthcoming. Consequently we are left with the question of whether or not I am justified in presenting the Zulu perspective through such a limited and obscure lens. The same enquiry can be made into each respective viewpoint we have tried to illuminate. The early Jewish perspective is especially underdeveloped here due to the lack of materials available. What did the early Jew think of being compared to religions that do not believe in one supreme deity? It must be concluded that although the comparison of tribal communities and those of ancient Israel are interesting, they have very little to offer by way of actual information and factual evidence. Are studies of this nature, then, worthless?

Despite its many shortcomings and faults the comparative method is a useful resource when studying different cultures and especially their religious beliefs. The challenge for scholars, however, is not to determine whether or not to employ the use of comparison, but to utilize the method responsibly. Arvind Sharma is a modern advocate of this careful approach which he terms, “reciprocal illumination” (Sharma 2005: ix). In his study, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology*, Sharma claims that the current method of comparison which most scholars of religious studies use has presented the same field of study with an “impasse” that is reflective of the two case studies being analysed here. This impasse can be described by citing, what Sharma finds, are the two differing models of comparison: “homonymous and synonymous” (2005: 25). Homonymous comparisons are those comparisons which appear obvious and straight forward, such as the Zulu circumcision or Lemba dietary laws, but when placed under the microscope come out looking different. On the other hand, synonymous comparisons are those which do not immediately appear to be related but may serve “similar significance in each tradition” (2005: 25). In Sharma’s theory, in

order for the use of the comparative method to be continued scholars must employ the latter type of comparison which he believes is the only way that one will be able to overcome the many inherent problems we have just cited above.

The crux of Sharma's argument, and why it may prove to be important to this particular study, is that he believes, and I grudgingly allow, that "Comparison is the hallmark of the study of religion..." (2005: 247). Comparisons, especially in regard to the unknown and unfamiliar (or 'other' if you will), are inevitably going to occur when one observes alien practices. What Sharma is attempting to advocate is that this inevitability is acceptable, as long as the one doing the comparison is aware of the many intrinsic difficulties and biases that go along with it. By looking beyond the obvious and overt similarities between traditions and focusing on the functions and phenomenological aspects of the rites, rituals, myths and symbols the religious studies scholar will be able to produce useable and useful comparisons and not the types we have seen here which have been proven to serve mainly political and social ends.

Regardless of one's opinion on the comparative method and its shortcomings, one can not escape the fact that it was and is employed constantly. In the case of the Zulu as well as the Lemba the comparative approach used by early colonialists, missionaries and travellers resulted in them being labelled 'Jewish'. By looking at the situation from different perspectives one is able to grasp the larger dynamics at play. Power relations, politics, as well as the development of identity with relation to space and time are all examples that I have cited in order to allow the bigger picture behind the use of comparisons to unfold before the reader. As we come full circle, it is now time to attempt an answer to our initial query of whether or not the comparative method is useful. Sharma's answer would be yes and I find in his system a path that when followed will provide scholars and students with a ready foundation from which to build and expand upon. The most difficult task, but the one with the most reward, is to provide a way for each group's voice and individuality to be distinguished while comparing them to others. This is the task of students and scholars in the twenty-first century and it is from this pursuit that greater knowledge and acceptance will be gained.

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