

## ***Ngoma Lungundu: an African Ark of the Covenant*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Lemba in Southern Africa are a specific group with unique traditions regarding Israelite origins. Their oral traditions also contain significant information on the leading role their priestly family played on their journey from the North into the Arabian Peninsula and eventually into Africa. They blazed their trail southwards into Africa as traders, with the ngoma lungundu (“the drum which thunders”) playing a very similar role to that of the Ark of the Covenant. Striking parallels between the two traditions as well as a possible link between these two narratives are scrutinised. This study shows how the Lemba have constructed their own set of beliefs around Biblical myths in the context of marginalisation among other African communities. Their oral culture constitutes their world-view and self-understanding or identity. It incorporates the role of oral traditions, history and historiography. One could draw parallels between orality in early Israelite and African religions. The reciprocity between orality and inscripturation of traditions yields valuable information regarding the possible development of traditions in the Old Testament.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

In the spirit of the year of the drum in Africa (2008), this article celebrates the mysterious and fearsome role that the *ngoma lungundu* played in African tradition. Bloomhill is convinced that “no other legend is so imbued with the mystic enthrallment of African folklore as that of Ngoma Lungundu” (“the drum that thunders”; 1960:165). The Lemba<sup>2</sup> in Southern Africa are a very specific group with unique traditions regarding Israelite extraction. Their oral traditions also contain significant information on the leading role their priestly family (Buba;

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<sup>1</sup> The concept for this title is derived from the title of the book published by Von Sicaud in 1952: *Ngoma lungundu. Eine Afrikanische Bundeslage*.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed discussion of the controversial origins of the people and the name “Lemba” is beyond the scope of this paper. It was a complex process occurring over many centuries that cannot be explained by simplistic views, such as the view that they either derived directly from a “lost tribe” of ancient Israel, or that they simply made some sort of religious shift along the way. In an attempt to provide maximum understanding, one has to draw from divergent sources – the oral traditions of the Lemba themselves, as well as from all possible sources such as anthropological, archaeological, ethnological and genetic sources (cf. Le Roux 2003).

*cohanim*) played on their journey from the North into the Arabian Peninsula and eventually into Africa. As traders they made their way southwards into Africa, with the *ngoma lungundu* playing a very similar role to that of the Ark of the Covenant. Especially in function it was very similar to the Biblical Ark, the famous lost Ark which had been sought without success throughout the ages. Both stories, that of the Ark of the Covenant and that of the *ngoma lungundu*, may be classified as myth.<sup>3</sup>

The experiential dimension of religion is often conveyed by means of myths. Myths, stories or images symbolise the invisible world (Smart 1989:15, 16). In fact, the origin of the word “myth” (Gk *muthos*) is “story”.<sup>4</sup> Our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspires to be, true. However, many scholars agree that the mythical does not necessarily imply that which is fictitious (Smart 1989:15, 16; cf. Georges 1968: 27, 137; Finnegan 1976: 327; Jobling 1987:17). On the contrary, Bascon (1965:4) provides a useful basis to define what is meant by “myth”:

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told are considered to be *truthful accounts* of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief [...] they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual [my italics – M. le R.].

Both myth and history explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story (McNeil 1986:1). Lincoln (1989:24) designates that small class of stories that possess both credibility and authority as myth. The term *mythistory* acknowledges the close kinship between myth and history and the manner in which the two interact to comprise “shared truths” (McNeil 1986:24-31; Lincoln 1989:23-26). Myth and history underpin the Lemba worldview. “Shared truths that provide a sanction for common effort have obvious survival value”, without which no group can long preserve itself (McNeil 1986:7). From the ancient Near East to modern times - groups have based their cohesion upon shared truths - truths that differed from time to time and place to place with a rich variety (McNeil 1986:7).

The “frequent repetition of the same authoritative story can help to maintain society in its regular and accustomed forms, the instrumentality of

<sup>3</sup> By “myth” we normally understand stories in which the high figures of the great gods play the main role (Gunkel 1987:26). These are stories “which accompanied rituals, which were basically poetic descriptions of the workings of nature, a different way of thinking about the world, different from that of modern man [sic]” (Rogerson 1976:9).

<sup>4</sup> Deist (1985:110) defines myth as “a story dealing with primeval, eschatological or cosmic time and conveying a universal message or responding to questions that cannot be answered within the category of real time”.

these familiar and traditional myths being quite similar to that of ancestral invocations” (Lincoln 1989:25). The same words that constitute truth for some are, and always will be, myth for others, who inherit or embrace different assumptions and organising concepts about the world we live in (McNeil 1986:19; Lincoln 1989:23-26; Grabbe 1997:194).<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I shall refer to the mysterious and fearsome role of the *ngoma lungundu* in Venda and Lemba tradition; the role of drumming and the Ark of the Covenant in early Israel and then draw parallels between orality in proto-Israelite<sup>6</sup> and African religions, and more specifically between the story of the *ngoma lungundu* and that of the Ark of the Covenant<sup>7</sup> (cf. le Roux 2004). The striking parallels between the two traditions as well as a possible link between these two narratives will be scrutinised.

The Lemba narratives and those in the pages of the Old Testament that are told or acted out on different occasions<sup>8</sup> mainly reflect their *origin* and *identity* as transmitted to them by their ancestors. This study shows how the

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<sup>5</sup> McNeil (1986:21) notes that the scope and range of historiography has widened, and that change appears to be irreversible to him. *Mythistory* is a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounters with one another and with the natural environment. Substantial criticism has been voiced concerning the problems of chronology of oral traditions, variations in different versions of the same events, and the problem of feedback between oral and written sources (Henige 1974:223-235). The historian who asks chronological questions from oral traditions is in most cases seeking information that these sources were never designed to provide (Henige 1974:1, 2). Reciprocity between orality and inscripturation of traditions yields valuable information regarding the possible development of traditions in the Old Testament. Their oral culture constitutes their world-view and self-understanding or identity. It incorporates the role of oral traditions, history and historiography. An in-depth discussion of the issues related to orality and inscripturation will not be addressed here. The main focus is on the relationship between myth and history.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the term “ancient Israel” or “Israel” in this study is in no way intended to oversimplify what is an intensely complex issue. It refers to an ethnic designation for the community and not to a geographic region (Miller 2005:1; cf. Dearman 1992:34; Davies 1997: 104). Davies (1995) and Thompson (1992) are convinced that the term “ancient Israel” was a fictitious creation of the imagination of the biblical historians (in Grabbe 1997:138).

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars are convinced that the idea of the Covenant is only dated much later and that it was retrojected onto this period (cf. Albertz 1994:57). However, Gottwald (1985:281) and others, maintain that the structure of the covenant, according to which the Israelite clans had to organise their daily lives, had already been established much earlier in the pre-monarchic period.

<sup>8</sup> Most Lemba and proto-Israelite myths and traditions are transmitted through songs, sermons, prayers, conversations, recitations, symbols, proverbs, sayings, written documents and numerous other media.

Lemba have constructed their own set of beliefs around Biblical myths in the context of marginalisation among other African communities.

According to the Biblical tradition Israelite clans similarly remembered numerous myths with historical and religious significance. Within these narratives the Ark of the Covenant with God played a major role. Possibly oral traditions increasingly obtained a more prominent place among the clans of Israel. These could have been important in establishing their *identity* and the *uniqueness* of their God in the midst of the conglomeration of other nations which also laid claim to the same land. Their traditions can therefore be described as a sacred factor of coherence with a political undertone.

## **B THE MYSTERIOUS AND FEARSOME ROLE OF THE *NGOMA LUNGUNDU* IN VENDA AND LEMBA TRADITION**

### **1 The mysterious and fearsome role of the *ngoma lungundu* in Venda**

“The concept that drums tend to symbolise political and religious authority is well known in sub-Saharan Africa” (Kruger 1996:49). Kruger refers to the Ugandan saying that “the drums beat for the chief”, meaning that they “are symbolic of chiefly political authority”, and that this also applies in other African cultures. There is no doubt that in Limpopo (and elsewhere) drums of this type are used, as has been frequently observed in more northerly parts of Africa, for conveying messages from one district to another (cf. Junod 1927:430).

“In the famous migration myth of the Lemba and Venda, Mwali<sup>9</sup>, the spirit of creation, presents a chief with *ngoma lungundu*, a magic drum” (Kruger 1996:49). Reception of the drum formalises his status as “king of all the country” (Van Warmelo 1940:16). The *ngoma lungundu* was and still is a sacred Venda object which was carried for them by the priestly family of the Lemba.

Research has shown that every race inhabiting South Africa (if not Africa) either has or had a drum of some kind at one period of its existence, but such drums vary considerably in both form and function (Kirby 1953:12).<sup>10</sup> In the past the women were the manufacturers of the drums and also the performers on them (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:351), beating the drums with their hands and fingers. From these early sources it is clear that only the women play – never the men (cf. Plate 10B, in Kirby 1953:30-34). As in other African cultures, ancestral spirits are an integral part of Venda cosmology. A great variety of rhythms are executed by combining the strokes in different ways.

<sup>9</sup> Alternative spelling: Mwari. “R” and “l” are interchangeable in many African languages.

<sup>10</sup> Kirby (1953:12) states that apparently the drum was not originally employed by the Bushmen in Southern Africa, but that the instrument was borrowed from the Hottentots. Recent research might prove him wrong.

Professor J. A. Van Rooy, who worked among the Venda and Lemba people for many years, emphasises that the kind of rhythm found among these people is very similar to central Africa and more specifically to the Near East (Private communication, 2007).<sup>11</sup>

The Venda (and their neighbours who manifestly borrowed from them, according to Kirby 1953:34-39) use a drum that is much larger in size and quite different in construction than those used by other African cultures in Southern Africa. The drum - a single-headed drum with a hemispherical resonator carved out of solid wood - is called the *ngoma lungundu* (specifically referring to the thundering sound when smitten). The upper portion of the drum is ornamented with four “handles” which *interlace in pairs*, the space between the handles being filled by a band of carving in relief (see Nettleton 1984 – plate V 18-21; Parfitt 2008: 261; Von Sicard 1952; Kirby 1953: Plate 13). Stayt (1931:53) indicates that six “handles” are sometimes to be found on the *ngoma*. Kirby (1953:35) considers the unusual “handles” a curious problem. He is convinced that they are useful for carrying the drum, which is of considerable weight, from place to place. On certain occasions, and under certain circumstances, the drum is suspended by two of them from a frame. But two handles only would surely have been sufficient for either of these purposes. It might also be used to fasten the instrument on the back of an animal, just as in the case of the pairs of drums called *naqqareh*, of the Arabs, and kindred drums. The head is of cow skin and before it is placed in position, one or more stones, called the *mbwedi*, are dropped into the shell. They are supposed to have come from the stomach of the *ngwena* or crocodile, which is one of the totems of the Venda<sup>12</sup> (Kirby 1953:36; cf. Van Heerden 1959:14).

Stayt (1931:53) provides the names of the various parts of the *ngoma*<sup>13</sup> and describes the numerous uses of the *ngoma*. Although the membrane of the drum is ox-hide, some local people believe it was made from human skin and

<sup>11</sup> Rose (1829:141) gave a description of a Xhosa rain-making ceremony during which the women, arranged in a semi-circle, beat upon the larger shields of the warriors as an accompaniment to their chanting. On rare occasions, the Swazi would use a drum called *intambula*. It consists of a clay beer pot, or *imbiza*, covered with a goatskin. Swazi men used to play the instrument by beating it with a reed or stick held in his right hand (Kirby 1953:26). During the “first menstruation ceremony” of a Zulu girl, Colenso (1878) affirms that the girl herself played a similar drum by striking it with a stick, but Bryant (1905) holds that it was tapped by the hand as an accompaniment to some song.

<sup>12</sup> At Shiluvane, East Africa, people say that a bullet is introduced into the shell when it is being made (Kirby 1953:41).

<sup>13</sup> To mention a few: the woodwork or shell of the drum is called “the egg of an ostrich”; the “handles” are called “a frog’s knee”; the opening at the base of the shell is *ndila*, meaning “the *vagina*, or road”; the “head” of the drum is “the skin of a man”.

was played with a human arm bone in earlier times (cf. Stayt 1931:316; Du Plessis 1940:100).

The instruments are usually played by women and girls, although the large *ngoma*, when the *tshikona* or national reed-flute dance is being performed, is generally played by a man, as is also the case when the drum is being played at the *domba* ceremony, and at other ceremonies for the preparation of young people for marriage (Stayt 1931). In Venda tradition the *ngoma* is also connected to rain making. When there is drought, it is beaten by the chief himself in order to bring rain. Many interviewees and researchers have witnessed that, if beaten by the chief, rain will fall within three days. The sound of the drum is like thunder and thunder generally precedes rain (cf. al-Idrisi's description of the sound of the *ngoma lungundu* c.1150, in Mullan 1969:73-76). It has also been described as the "voice of Mwali".

According to Kirby this instrument was previously used as a war-drum in the days when there was fighting in the northern Transvaal<sup>14</sup> (now Limpopo; Kirby 1953:38; Stayt 1931). In the past it had a specific effect on the enemy when beaten. According to some locals it caused the enemy to sleep when they heard the beat (Du Plessis 1940: 110). In times of war it was carried by the Lemba, because of their magic skills during warfare. Kirby says he was allowed to see such a drum but for white men it was forbidden to touch it. During other ceremonies only the carriers of the drum (women) were allowed to touch the drum and it was not supposed to touch the ground at all. During rest periods the drum was put on their laps.

Tradition has it that in 1770 a fire leaped out from Mwali's presence and destroyed the *ngoma lungundu* and many disobedient Venda people (cf. Möller-Malan 1953). According to both Lemba and Venda traditions the original *ngoma* or a replica of the original drum might still be in one of the caves in Dumbghe Mountain in Zimbabwe (cf. Von Sicard 1943:140). Others believe it is somewhere in the Soutpansberg Mountains (cf. Le Roux 2003). In 1952 Von Sicard described how he found the *ngoma* in a cave in Zimbabwe and took it to a museum in Buluwayo. In 1959 Van Heerden described the *ngoma lungundu* and its whereabouts in a cave in Tshiendeulu (in the Soutpansberg, close to the so-called Dzata I) in the former Venda. He saw a bigger and a smaller drum and added that when the older drums perished from time to time they were replaced by new ones.

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<sup>14</sup> Kruger (1996:55) claims that the *ngoma lungundu* has risen to fame because of its value as a symbol of ruling power.

## 2 The mysterious and fearsome role of the *ngoma lungundu* in Lemba tradition

The Lemba or Basena (people coming from Sena) version adds a further dimension to the story of the *ngoma lungundu*. There is a Lemba saying: “Once we had a drum because we were a holy people...” Nothing precise is known about the origin of the Lemba (it is not the intention of this article to try to solve that issue) or that of the *ngoma lungundu*. Although it is based upon sketchy evidence, elderly Lemba informants still recall the story told by their great grandparents (D: G: 6; Junod 1908:277): they came by boat (some say on the back of a tree) to Africa from a very remote place (called Sena) on the other side of the Phusela (but they did not know where Phusela was). A terrible storm nearly destroyed them. The boat was broken into two pieces. One half of them reached the shores; the others were taken away with the second half of the boat, and they do not know what happened to them. They arrived among the Banyai<sup>15</sup> (but they were not related to them; cf. al-Idrisi below), but after a time they moved southwards to what is now called the Limpopo Province.

Mathivha (1992:1-7) explained that before 586 B.C.E. when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and many Jews were captured, some of the Basena escaped and migrated to the open spaces in Yemen. The linking of a date to these migration traditions is most probably a very recent addition by leaders, such as Mathivha. This is one example of the impact of literacy on the traditional accounts of an oral society.<sup>16</sup> I have not found too many examples of this propensity to incorporate the written word into putatively oral traditions. However, one should consider the possibility that some of the Israelite clans escaped the exile by fleeing into the Arabian Peninsula, as is indicated on inscriptions found in the Negev (cf. Bar-Adon 1975, an early Hebrew inscription in a Judean Desert Cave, *Israel Explorational Journal* 25, 231, 227, 232, in Niditch 1996:47-48).

On the Peninsula the Basena met Phoenician merchants who introduced them to trade with the Orient and Africa, says Mathivha (1992:1-7). In the meantime they established themselves at Sena and “Phusela” in the Yemen Peninsula. “Judaism” was practised to the full in the city of Sena, where they stayed for a long time, trading by means of boats with the east coast of Africa. According to Mathivha, by 600 B.C.E. conflict had already arisen between the Basena and the Arabs, causing some Basena to return to Jerusalem while others left Phusela I and Sena I (in Yemen) and crossed the sea to Africa. An ancient

<sup>15</sup> Alternative spelling in other sources: Vhanyai.

<sup>16</sup> During recently conducted fieldwork among the Lemba, I found that the abundance of printed accounts sometimes made it difficult to extract new and untainted testimonies from my informants regarding the early history of the Lemba.

city called “Sena” was indeed discovered in the eastern Hadhramaut<sup>17</sup> (Parfitt 1995:5, 7). Moreover, many clan names of the Lemba are commonplace in the Hadhramaut such as Hadji, Hamisi, Sadiki and Seremane. Not one of them had the means of ascertaining in advance whether their clan names correlated with the names in the Hadhramaut. *One conclusion is that their oral traditions are very old.*

According to the folklore of Yemenite Jews, their ancient forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen, exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple (Goitein 1969:226). This element within folklore corresponds with the above-mentioned tradition of the origin of the Lemba. Goitein refers to Islamic and Christian inscriptions, as well as inscriptions written in the Himyarite language, which also bears witness to a *Jewish presence* in Yemen during the centuries preceding Islam (1969:226).

It would be this “Jewish presence” that provide the background for an alternative history of the Ark, as told by folk etymologies and old Arabic texts until the eighth century. The eighth century Arab historian Wahb ibn Munabbib and others claim that the hidden Ark was discovered by the Jurhum tribe, which controlled parts of north-western Arabia, in the sealed cave where Jeremiah had hidden it and that they took the Ark to Mecca (in Parfitt 2008:211, 212). Arabic sources indicate that those Jews in Yemen had the Ark of the Covenant in their possession and they used it against their enemies on the Peninsula (Parfitt 2008:113,114, 210-213). Parfitt (2008:218) records the wide belief in the Wadi Hadhramaut that the Ark had been hidden in a sealed cave, perhaps in the Wadi Hadhramaut itself. Lions and snakes protect the secret of the place.

However, another tradition in Yemen supports the belief that centuries ago a group of Jews left Yemen for Africa but did not return (Beeston 1952:16-22). The Lemba have indeed a tradition that puts them in Africa, more specifically in a city called Sena. The tradition has it that they built the city of Sena (II) and Sayuna (which means Zion<sup>18</sup>) in Africa on the Zambezi, which has also been located by many scholars (al-Idrisi [c.1150] in Theal [1898-1903]1964a; Parfitt 1997:336). Oral traditions throughout the different Lemba communities concur on at least two points: they trace their immediate origins to Sena II (on the Zambezi) and their remote beginnings to Phusela and a city called Sena on the other side of the Phusela. But *the myth’s lack of sophistication* renders it more notable that it begins in some land beyond Sena (D:O:6).

<sup>17</sup> It is located just before the valley turns away towards the sea, which has preserved traditions of ancient migrations to Africa. It was situated on the trade route from the sea to Tarim, and the valley that leads from Sena in the eastern Hadhramaut (in Yemen) to an old port on the Yemeni coast called Sayhut is the *wadi al-Masilah*. Parfitt (1997:336) believes that Masilah may be the “Phusela” of Lemba oral tradition.

<sup>18</sup> Sayuna is identical to the Judeo-Arabic word for Zion (Parfitt 2008:200, 201, 231).

The Lemba believe that they were guided by a star (sent by God/Mwari) from Sena (on the Zambezi) to what we call Zimbabwe today and southwards to other places. The star served as a symbol of their God Mwari's presence. Here enter the similarities with the role of the Ark in Ancient Israel. Together with the star, it appears that on their journey to the South, the *ngoma lungundu* played a more or less similar role to that played by the Ark of the Covenant for the proto-Israelites. The *ngoma* was considered sacred and was not to be touched improperly or placed on the bare ground as was the case with the ark (Möller-Malan 1953). Inside the drum were sacred objects<sup>19</sup> which belonged to the Vhasendji<sup>20</sup> (probably the Venda). Because of their magical skills especially during warfare, the priestly family of the Lemba had to carry the drum. When the enemy heard the sound of this magical drum, it had a special effect on them – they were not able to move, since it rendered them utterly powerless. At night it was guarded by a mythical pillar of flame (Bloomhill 1960:165). If this magic drum was lost, calamity would befall them.

According to Bloomhill (1960:165) the origin of this legend could be traced back to the Chasenzil of Matongoni (from where they were driven), while carrying the drum to the South. This all happened before missionary influence was known by any of their people. The Lemba experienced the sound of the drum with awe and fear since it was perceived as the voice of the great god, *Mambo wa denga*, king of heaven! He was also called “Mutumbuka-Vhathu, the creator” (Möller-Malan 1953:1).

Although the Lemba themselves never make the connection between the *ngoma lungundu* and the Ark of the Covenant (as far as I know), many scholars observe such parallels. In sub-Saharan Africa, at least in the interior, there are no written records and we are dependent upon oral tradition. On the east coast of Africa Arabs and other observers left some accounts of what they saw and heard of this extraordinary group of people and the role the *ngoma* played (cf. Le Roux 2003; Parfitt 2008:230).

The earliest direct reference to the presence of the Lemba and the *ngoma* on the east coast of Africa is by the twelfth century Arab geographer, al-Idrisi [*circa* 1150] who records (as cited in Mullan 1969:73-76) that the Senzi (Zanji people) - possessors of the *ngoma lungundu* (cf. Junod 1927; Van Warmelo 1935:122; De Vaal 1947:46; Gayre of Gayre 1967:5; Davison 1984:119) were forced from their territory and down into the Sena area (at the Zambezi). These people of the magic drum, calling themselves the BaSenzi (probably the Venda), became closely associated with the Lemba in the same area.

<sup>19</sup> It possessed all the spears and banners of royalty and many badges, white cotton garments and the *madi* and *denga* royal beads – worn by the high priest around his neck especially during circumcision ceremonies (Möller-Malan 1953 1-7).

<sup>20</sup> Meaning: “Heathen” or “Gentiles”. Alternative terms are Senzi, Zindji, Vhazhenzhi, Zang, Zing or Zenj (Theal [1898-1903]1964b:200; Von Sicard 1952:175).

Al-Idrisi further records that the inhabitants of al-Banyes<sup>21</sup> worship a drum called Arrahim covered with skin on one side. He says it makes a terrible noise (when smitten) which can be heard about three miles away. As “l” and “r” are interchangeable in many African languages it is possible that what he actually heard was Errahim – a corruption for the word Elohim – the Hebrew word for God (in Parfitt 2008:227).

Von Sicard (1943; 1952) who spent his whole missionary career working amongst the Lemba people in Zimbabwe, was possibly the first scholar to draw definite parallels between the Ark and the *ngoma lungundu* and those between *ngoma lungundu* and the sixth to the thirteenth century Ethiopian *Kebrā Nagast*<sup>22</sup> (“Splendour of the Kings”; cf. Le Roux 2004). He arrives at the conclusion that the Lemba people literally carried the concept of the Ark of the Covenant and concomitant related Semitic customs southwards into Africa. He describes their *ngoma* as “Eine Afrikanische Bundeslage” (i.e. An African Ark of the Covenant). He is convinced that the Lemba were strongly influenced by the numerous transmitted stories (and the *Kebrā Nagast*) concerning the possible presence of the Ark in Ethiopia and that they carried, as an elite, priestly group, those concepts southwards by means of their *ngoma lungundu*. If the story of the *ngoma lungundu* can be linked to the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Kebrā Nagast* narrative (as suggested by Von Sicard) it indicates that their tradition is at least 700 years old. If it is linked to the observance of al-Idrisi in 1150, the implication is that their tradition could be 900 years old. Parfitt (2008) takes the tradition of *ngoma lungundu* even further back to the Arabian Peninsula.

The narrative behind this story of *ngoma lungundu* and the emotion of the specific experience of God, behind this, classifies this story as experiential.

## C THE ROLE OF THE ARK OF THE COVENANT IN EARLY ISRAEL

### 1 The mysterious and fearsome role of the Ark in Israelite tradition

Different narratives in the Old Testament record how important the Ark of the Covenant was to the Israelites. It stemmed from their “wilderness sojourn” (from Africa to the Promised Land) and was directly linked to the Covenant with Yahweh.<sup>23</sup> It is very difficult to determine how old the stories surrounding the description and the existence of the Ark actually are, or how old the traditions are on which these are based.

<sup>21</sup> This name is also in concurrence with Lemba tradition of origin.

<sup>22</sup> A highly valued Ethiopian literary work, reflecting on the history of their kings.

<sup>23</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to deal with the issues at stake surrounding the different Ark narratives in the Old Testament and other Ancient Near Eastern sources or the question of the “Covenant” as such (cf. Scheffler 2001).

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There are, nevertheless, various traditions concerning the remembrance of a *cultic object* that was apparently of great significance to the Israelite clans on their journey throughout the desert and also during the so-called period of the Judges (Josh 6:12-21; 1 Sam 3:3; Kraus 1966:125; Deist 1985:40). Albertz (1994:57) surmises that the Ark probably did not have cultic significance in the beginning, but that it was only a symbol that guaranteed the presence of Yahweh. If the idea of the Covenant is only dated much later and was thus retrojected onto this period, then such an idea could be considered. However, Gottwald (1985: 281) and others maintain that the structure of the covenant “according to which the Israelite clans had to organise their daily lives, had already been established much earlier in the pre-monarchic period”. Nevertheless, many magical aspects related to the presence of the Ark are described in the pages of the Old Testament.

In Leviticus 10:1 and similar contexts the Bible is quite explicitly referring to the Ark when it speaks of “the Lord” and/or “before the Lord,” or of “Yahweh” and/or “of the presence of Yahweh”. It is best illustrated in the passage from Numbers 10:35: “And it came to pass, when the Ark set forward that Moses said, Rise up, Lord and let thine enemies be scattered and let them that hate thee fall before thee” (KJAV). Says Henton Davies (1962: 222-223): “The Ark is not only seen as the leader of Israel’s host, but is directly addressed as Yahweh. There is virtually an identification of Yahweh and the Ark [...] there is no doubt that the Ark was interpreted as the extension or embodiment of the presence of Yahweh.”

As soon as the Ark has been introduced in Leviticus, magical things started to happen. The first incident concerned the two sons of Aaron, Moses’ own brother. As members of the priestly family they had access to the Holy of Holies. According to the book of Leviticus (10:1) they “offered strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not.” The devastating result was that “there went out fire from the Lord and devoured them and they died there before the Lord” (KJAV). Leviticus 10:2 says: “[F]rom Yahweh’s presence a flame leaped out and consumed them and they perished in the presence of Yahweh” (KJAV).

According to Leviticus (16:1-2) a “cloud upon the throne of mercy” which threatened Aaron with death must have been visible between the cherubim. According to Ginzberg (1911, as cited in Hancock 1993:275) the cloud was not always present, but on those occasions when it did materialise the Israelites believed “that the demons held sway”, and then even Moses would not dare to approach (cf. Exod 40:35).

Other supposedly supernatural phenomena manifested themselves “between the cherubim” that faced each other across the Ark’s golden lid. A few days after the death of Aaron’s two sons, Moses went into the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle (still in the shadow of Mount Sinai). After he had entered

Moses “heard the voice of one speaking unto him from the mercy seat that was upon the Ark [...] from between the two cherubim” (Numbers 7:89). Ginzberg (1911, in Hancock 1993:275) refers to very ancient Jewish legends which state that this voice came from heaven “in the form of a tube of fire”. Fire seems often to have been associated with the cherubim (Numbers 7:89).

The Ark was carried on the shoulders of the “Kohathites” (or “sons of Kohath”), a sub-clan of the tribe of Levi to which both Moses and Aaron (the priesthood, *cohanim*) also belonged. It was not allowed to touch the ground or to be touched improperly. According to several Jewish legends and rabbinical commentaries on the Old Testament, these bearers were occasionally killed by the “sparks” which the Ark emitted, and sometimes “the Ark [was] able to carry its carriers as well as itself e.g. during the crossing of the Jordan” (Ginzberg 1911, cited in Hancock – 1993:276).<sup>24</sup>

Another Jewish legend, supported by Midrashic commentaries, says that during the wilderness wanderings “[t]he Ark gave signal for breaking camp by soaring high and then swiftly moving before the camp at a distance of three days’ march” (Ginzberg 1922, cited in Hancock 1992:552, footnote 24). It had the function of choosing the way it wished to go. According to the Biblical narrative it was guided by a pillar of cloud during the day and guarded by a pillar of flame at night. Another function was that during their wanderings in the wilderness, the Israelites were able to use the Ark as a weapon. It went into battle with the army of Israel and it had powers so terrible that it could bring victory even when the odds seemed overwhelming (Num 10:35).

The Ark was able to discharge these two functions, because of “a positive divine power resident in it” (Morgenstern 1968:27-28 in Hancock 1993). It is where the *Shekhinah* – the divine presence of God – lived (Parfitt 2008:33). According to the narratives of 1 Samuel 5:1-7:1 the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines from the Israelites, and then later returned. These narratives tell of the *power* of the Ark as a holy object, and thus indirectly of the superior power of God over other gods. According to the tradition, different plagues afflicted the Philistines in more than one way (1 Sam 6:6; cf. Rogerson 1976:50).

## 2 The construction of the Ark and different Ark narratives

In Exodus 25:10-22 we find the precise dimensions of the sacred relic, the Ark of the Covenant. The materials to be used for its construction were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai by God himself. Moses passed it on *verbatim* to the arti-

<sup>24</sup> See also Morgenstern 1968:20, footnote 25 as well as pieces of learned Midrashic exegesis on the same subject in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, Vol II, 105 (in Hancock 1993).

sans named Bezaleel and Oholiab, men “filled with the spirit of God” (Exod 31:2-4), who made the Ark exactly as specified (Exod 37:1-9 to 41).

The Hebrew word for Ark is *aron* which means chest or cupboard or even “box” (anything that stores objects). The word *aron* comes from the root ARN or ARH. The scribes who wrote the detailed description of the Ark had most probably never seen it (Parfitt 2008:261). They were infinitely more influenced by Egyptian and Assyrian models than by the Ark itself (Parfitt 2008:261). The Ark as we know it is likely to be an imitation of some Egyptian or Near Eastern cultic phenomenon.

To this end Parfitt (2008:108) points out that the word *aron* is also used for “sarcophagus” or “mummy-case”. The Babylonian Talmud has a commentary on the verse: “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him” (Exod 13:19, NIV). There is a description of how the bones of the patriarch were placed in one Ark, and the living God was in the other Ark, and the two of them – symbolising life and death, were carried in front of the Israelite armies. This is a very early indication of the possible presence of the Ark even before they left for the desert.

Interestingly, Deuteronomy 10 gives another version of the construction of the Ark. According to this narrative Moses got the instructions from God, made a simplified Ark (ordinary wooden box) from *shittim* wood (acacia wood) without any gold, or cherubim, and placed inside it the two tablets of stone, also given to him on Mount Sinai, on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments (Deut 10:5, see also Exod 40:20; cf. Niditch 1996:79, 80).<sup>25</sup>

Old Testament sources (Exod 25:10; Deut 10:1-8; 31:9 etc.) are too incomplete to provide clarity about this matter and, to complicate matters even further, the various traditions concerning the Tabernacle, the Ark, and the Temple became intertwined and are therefore difficult to distinguish (Schmidt 1983:113; cf. Josh 8:30ff; Judg 20:27ff).

The Old Testament account is most probably a purged version of a much more ancient narrative which existed in the oral tradition and which included elements of many which have been forgotten. Modern scholars (cf. Parfitt 2008:261) accept that “the description of the Ark and its functions were mainly written at a time when the Temple was the predominant feature of Israelite life”. The “history of the Ark had to fit in with the concept of Temple and in many ways the story of the Ark and the tabernacle is a precursor to the story of the Temple” (Parfitt 2008:262). A simple acacia “weapon” from Africa (Egypt) or from the desert obviously could not fit into that scheme of things.

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<sup>25</sup> In the book of Revelations the author also add the staff of Aaron and a certain amount of manna to the content of the Ark.

The Deuteronomist accorded the Ark the function of the “bearer of the Covenant” (or the Ten Commandments; Albertz 1994:57; cf. Noth [1958]1983; Gottwald 1985:281). Finally, the Ark (as described in Exod 25) came to rest in a special permanent place in the Holy of Holies inside the Temple built by Solomon (1 Kgs 8:6). Thereafter, there is no further mention of the Ark being carried to war or at festivals.

Some scholars are convinced that it was no longer in Solomon’s Temple at the time of the Temple’s destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. They base their views on the narratives in Jeremiah, and on the fact that the Ark is not mentioned among the vessels carried into exile or brought back from Babylon. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, Menelik I (according to tradition, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) and the high priest’s son took the Ark from the Temple in Jerusalem and let priests carry it to Aksum, the sacred city in Ethiopia, where it is believed to be still in existence (*Kebra Nagast*, Chapters 38-48; Isaac 1993:61). 1 Kings 14 mentions the ransacking of the temple by Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt, in the fifth year of King Rehoboam. He took all the treasures of the royal palace, but there was no proof that he had carried off the Ark.

The second Temple does not seem to have possessed the Ark either (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 5:2, cited in Isaac 1993:60). The Talmud records that it was hidden by Josiah “in its place” or “beneath the woodshed” - somewhere in the Temple under the instructions of the prophetess Huldah in 639 B.C.E (the precise date is uncertain; Babylonian Talmud, *Shekalim* 6:1-2; *Yoma* 53b-54a). It is suggested that it was buried under the floor of the part of the Temple where the wood used for sacrificial fires was stored. On the other hand, 2 Maccabees 2:1-7 says that Jeremiah hid it on Mount Nebo.

A tenth-century insertion, called the *Tractate of the Temple Vessels*, included in a rare Hebrew book known as *Emek ha-Melekh* (Valley of the King) deals with the hiding places of the Temple treasure including the Ark (in Parfitt 2008:113-115).<sup>26</sup> According to the Tractate, the Ark had been removed prior to the Babylonian invasion in 587 B.C.E. The Ark and the other treasures were hidden on the western side of a high mountain – to be discovered with the coming of the Messiah. In the *Copper Scroll* from Qumran this treasure is said to be hidden in sixty-four different places. The amount of gold and silver men-

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<sup>26</sup> The tractate is part of the Geniza Fragments found in Cairo in a special storehouse of a synagogue. Almost 200 000 Hebrew manuscript fragments, which were written between the ninth and nineteenth centuries and which were no longer in use, were deposited in this room. Most of those fragments are today housed either in Cambridge University Library or in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

tioned in the Copper Scroll are rather modest, whereas the treasure in the tractate is counted in the millions of bars of gold.<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned above Arabic sources refer to the presence of the Ark in the eastern Hadhramaut (Parfitt (2008)). It was taken there by some Jewish groups who at some stage sought refuge in the Arabian Peninsula. Those sources describe how the Ark was used in warfare against their enemies. Later it was hidden and concealed in a cave.

Parfitt (2008:50) is probably correct when he states that no Jew would have destroyed the Ark and if the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians or Romans had destroyed it or taken it away, it would have been recorded. The “enemy” would have boasted about it and for the Jews it would have been a national disaster. They would have chronicled it and there would have been a festival of lamentation for the Ark. Instead, history provides us with total silence. The many modern attempts to explain the disappearance of the Ark have been to no avail.

The fact remains that the Ark played an important, mysterious and sometimes fearsome role in the military actions of the Israelite clans: that is, it symbolised the presence of Yahweh, without which there would have been no victory (cf. Judg 3:28).

#### **D THE NGOMA LUNGUNDU AND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT**

The Ark, like the *ngoma*, had supernatural powers – both were symbols of divine presence (Parfitt 2008). With its precious contents it was installed behind a “veil” in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle (Exod 40:21), the tent-like structure which the Israelites used as their place of worship during their wanderings in the desert. It was never allowed to touch the ground and it was not supposed to be touched improperly. It was practically divine. Anyone who even looked at it would be blasted by its awesome power. Like the *ngoma* it was carried into battle as a weapon and a guarantor of victory. Sacred objects of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ron Wyatt (without any archaeological qualifications and whose love for the Bible drove him to prove its validity) claimed to have discovered the Ark in about 1982 during secret excavations just outside the walls of the Old City, in an underground chamber above which he located the original site of the crucifixion. According to him, the blood of Jesus flowed down through this crack onto the lid of the Ark. The traditions of the Old Testament animal sacrifice reached their most sublime point with the sacrifice of Jesus - when the blood of Jesus dripped onto the Mercy Seat. Parfitt (2008:70, 71) says that according to his sources the Israelis refuse to recognise the connection between the Ark and the crucifixion, as it would lead to the mass conversion of Jews to Christianity. Wyatt claimed that the Israeli Antiquities department had made secrecy a condition of this permit. The access to the tunnel to the chamber was sealed with reinforced concrete.

Lemba were included inside the drum. The Ark contained the tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been inscribed as well as the magic staff of Aaron, the brother of Moses. A priestly caste founded by Aaron guarded and carried the Ark. The priestly clan of the Buba, who led the Lemba out of Israel, guarded and carried the *ngoma* (Parfitt 2008; the fact that men carried the drum is quite unique to African custom). Like the Ark, the *ngoma* showed them the direction to go and gave the signal for where to camp and for breaking camp. The *ngoma* was guided by a star on their journey to the South and was guarded by a mythical pillar of flame at night. By means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night the Ark of the Covenant was guided and guarded. If the magic drum or the Ark of the Covenant was lost, calamity would befall them. Today, both objects are reported lost.

If the functional similarities were striking, the differences in form were significant. The Ark was apparently a kind of box, coffer, or chest, while the *ngoma* – although it also carried objects inside – was a drum. It was not only a ritual object but also a musical instrument (Kruger 1996:57). There have never been any suggestions that the Ark was a drum. The Ark (according to the description in Exodus) was made of wood but it was covered in sheets of gold, the *ngoma* was just made of wood.

The functional similarities are striking. But could it be possible that the *ngoma* is a descendant of the wooden ark described in Deuteronomy 10? Or could it be possible that the Ark might have been some kind of drum?

## **E DRUMMING IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

For this investigation it might be worthwhile to briefly (due to space constraints) look into the role drums played in the ancient Near East and more specifically in proto-Israelite communities. The Egyptians possessed a great variety of percussion and shaking instruments. Entire families of drums are depicted in ancient monuments, from the small hand-drum to the big, barrel-shaped type (Sendrey 1969:40). In general, the music of Babylonia and Assyria was not basically different from that of Egypt (Sendrey 1969:45).<sup>28</sup>

The *tof* was the most primitive, consequently the most common instrument of the Israelite clans that could easily be played by anybody. In Egyptian

<sup>28</sup> According to Parfitt *tof*, plural *tuppim*, is a collective term for all kinds of hand-drums of the ancient Hebrews. The word is of Assyrian origin (*tuppu*); the precursors of the Assyrians, the Sumerians also called the hand drum *dup* or *tup*. In the Arabian language, the hand drum is called *duff* (Sendrey 1969:372). If we apply the forms reproduced in Oriental antiquities to the Jewish usage, we may assume that the *tof* consisted of a wooden or metal hoop, covered with an animal skin (ram or wild goat), and that it was played either with the fingers or with the clenched fist. The Bible and rabbinical literature give no hints as to the playing of *tuppim* with sticks (Sendrey 1969:373).

monuments women mostly played the hand-drum, in Assyrian pictures men play also and in Israel it was played mainly by girls and women (1 Sam 10:5; 2 Sam 6:5; 1 Chr 13:8; Sendrey 1969:373). At religious, semi-religious and secular festivities, dancing, and drumming with the use of *tuppim* are repeatedly attested in the Scriptures (cf. Exod 15; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; 6:5; 1 Chr 13:8; Sendrey 1969:373). The *tof* appears quite early, at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. on a rock drawing in the Negev as an instrument accompanying a round dance of male figures, thus affirming a Near Eastern tradition thousands of years old (Braun 2002: 70, 73, 74).

Once the Israelite slaves succeeded in evading Pharaoh's army, Moses recited a poem and then his sister, Miriam, takes the stage (Exod 15). She had a drum (*tof*) in her hand – an instrument the Israelites had encountered and adopted for their own purposes in Egypt.<sup>29</sup> (Sendrey 1969:372). The first object unpacked by the fugitives as they fled slavery and oppression was an African drum (Parfitt 2008). In Africa and the Middle East they are symbols of authority. Parfitt (2008) suggests that by beating the drum Miriam was making a very specific political point: the Egyptian gods had been overcome; the God of the Israelites would lead them to salvation and redemption.<sup>30</sup>

## **E A DESCENDANT OF THE WOODEN ARK?**

Philip Davies (1975; 1977 in Parfitt 2008: 263-268) is convinced that there might have been more than one Ark and argues convincingly about a possible relationship between the Ark and the *ephod*. According to him the *ephod* and the Ark were completely interchangeable terms. This implies that until the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem there were multiple Arks because *ephods* are popping up all over the place (cf. Parfitt 2008: 261). Davies (1975; 1977 in Parfitt 2008:263-268) even indicates the possibility that the cover of the *ephod* was a decorative casing for a drum. Around the opening of the top of the *ephod*, there was an interlaced pattern (Exod 28:31). Parfitt found a *ngoma* in

<sup>29</sup> Both the ancient Hebrew *tof* and the Arabic *tuf* most probably derive from ancient Egypt. It may be associated with the Greco-Egyptian demon Typhon (the origin of the word typhoon) who became the counterpoint to the benign Osiris, lord of the underworld whom Typhon had incarcerated in a wooden Ark and thrown into the Nile. Perhaps originally the drum was smitten to keep Typhon away (Parfitt 2008:94, 95).

<sup>30</sup> An instrument named *tabla* is mentioned in several rabbinic writings. However, there are only vague and largely incompatible opinions about its nature and character. The majority of commentators take the *tabla* to be a hand-drum with the same functions as those of the biblical *tof* (Sendrey 1969:412). Several commentators hazarded an explanation that it must have been a rather voluminous drum, since – according to a rabbinic source – the wailing women would sit upon it at funerals (Sendrey 1969:413).

Harare with the same kind of “unusual” handles and interlaced/ interwoven pattern on the side (2008:36, 37).<sup>31</sup>

When Jeremiah 3: 16, 17 states that “[i]n those days... the ark of the covenant of the Lord [...] will not be missed nor will another one be made”, it is possible that he implies that the older, perished Arks were most likely replaced by new ones. His words may also mean that more than one Ark was used simultaneously. Parfitt (cf. Davies 1975, in Parfitt) in a private communication (2008) remains convinced that “the *ngoma* [the drum] is a descendant of the wooden ark of Deuteronomy made by Moses as mentioned in the Talmud and other commentaries.”

There are numerous indications of more than one Ark. Jewish tradition suggests that one Ark was intended to house the broken tablets of the Law – one engraved by “the finger of God” and another for the tablets Moses carved<sup>32</sup> (Parfitt 2008:56; Babylonian Talmud, *Rashi* 61-69; *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 6:1).

Parfitt (2008:109) points out that in Akkadian there is an apparent clear cognate in the form of *aranu*, which means “coffin”. It can also mean “wooden box”. There is also an Arabic cognate with the same meaning as the Hebrew: *iran*, which means “box”. The qal form *aron*, or something close, taken from the RWN root, could theoretically mean “I overcome” or “I lay waste”. Furthermore, the root RNN, means “making a ringing sound” in Hebrew or “making a twanging sound” in Arabic. Theoretically, *aron* could originate from these two roots, with the following meanings: “I make a ringing sound”, or “I am the one that makes a ringing sound”, or “the layer to waste”. Parfitt indicates that it is entirely possible that the Ark’s regular association with trumpets, noise and musical processions, plus the variant etymology that the Hebrew

<sup>31</sup> The *ephod* was covered over by a blue covering of animal skin called *tahash* in Hebrew. It is usually translated as “badger” (cf. Exod 28:6-14), but can also be translated as “seal” or “dugong”.

<sup>32</sup> Thus Rashi: “At the end of forty days, He granted me favor, and said, ‘Carve for yourself,’ and, afterward, ‘Make for yourself an ark.’ However, I made the ark first, for, when I arrive with the tablets in hand, where shall I place them? Now this is not the ark which Betzalel made, for they were not engaged with the Tabernacle until after Yom Kippur, since, it was only when he descended from the mountain that he instructed them concerning the construction of the Tabernacle. And Betzalel made the Tabernacle first, and afterward the ark and the vessels. Hence, this was a different ark; this one went with them when they waged war, while the one Betzalel made did not go to war, except in Eli’s time, (Shmuel 1, 4.) when they were punished over it, and it was captured.” *Yerushalmi Shekalim*, 6:1 says: “However, according to a dissenting Talmudic opinion, the pieces of the first tablets as well as the second tablets were later placed in the ark of the Tabernacle, and Moshe’s ark was removed from use.”

word for Ark actually meant it could have had something to do with musical instruments.

Thomas *et al.* (2000) are convinced that genetics was able to validate the fairly unlikely tradition of origin of the Lemba. It is a tradition which normal historical and anthropological methods and sources failed to fully confirm. Parfitt (2008:245) concludes that the genetic trail had led to the Lemba priestly guardians of the *ngoma lungundu* and one line ran straight from the Israelite clans to the Buba clan of the Lemba of Southern Africa. To this end Parfitt (2008:245) points out that it is

no longer too far-fetched to imagine that a secret priestly guild had preserved one of the Arks of ancient times, perhaps one of the purged Arks, or the original Ark of Moses, and transported it across the Arabian desert perhaps by way of Ethiopia, perhaps aided by the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews or Falashas), and concealed it in some hiding place, perhaps in the Hadhramaut in the vicinity of Senna. With the rise of Islam and the persecution of Jews, the Ark was again taken by the priests, this time to Southern Africa.

## F CONCLUSION

One should seriously consider that the oral phase encapsulated in many sections of the Old Testament is much more important for the understanding of the character and essence of certain sections of the Old Testament than the later written phase. Oral traditions that were handed down were fluid and not supposed to be in “fixed” form. Literacy in the earlier Lemba communities and that of early Israel also has to be understood in the context of an orality-of-tradition culture (Le Roux 2003:233).

It is clear that written sources are not the only shapers of people’s notion about the past. Lemba myths and traditions provide more information than any written sources. Their oral culture is constitutive of their world-view and self-understanding or identity. It incorporates the role of oral traditions, history and historiography. Parallels between orality in proto-Israelite and African religions can be drawn, and more specifically between the story of the *ngoma lungundu* and that of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Old Testament is an immensely old document and was written over several centuries by many different authors. Parts of it already existed as oral traditions, to varying groups of original hearers and readers, each of which was situated in a unique context. For political and religious reasons the Old Testament text was altered and edited during different times by various authors. Perhaps deliberate attempts had been made to suppress a good deal of the function and “true history” of the Ark of the early strata. It is not sure how much of the Old Testament was modified and reworked by later editors.

Jewish tradition suggests that there was one Ark to house the broken tablets and the Law and another for the tablets carved by Moses.

Lemba tradition has taken the Lemba history back to the Arabian Peninsula and Israelite and Arabian sources took the Ark of the Covenant to the Arabian Peninsula.

According to the earliest reference to the *ngoma lungundu*, the Venda people possessed it, the Lemba carried it, and it is still a Venda object today. However, I could not find a single oral tradition among the Lemba or any written source which indicates a link between the *ngoma* and the Ark of the Covenant. They were the carriers of the *ngoma* and certainly gave a special meaning to its role. Being of Semitic descent, they might have transferred the role and meaning of the Ark on the *ngoma* or they might have been influenced by the *Kebra Nagast* story.

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

According to rabbinic sources the drum is susceptible to uncleanness as being something that is sat upon, since the wailing woman sits on it (see Sendrey 1969, footnote 745)<sup>33</sup> and because it was covered by an animal skin. It is most unlikely that they would put their sacred objects, such as the tablets with the Ten Commandments inside an unclean object.

It is clear that a straightforward “explaining away” of the supernatural in both stories will not do justice to the complexities of these traditions. Only a sympathetic theological approach will appreciate its real point: it expresses the Israelite clan’s conviction (and that of the Lemba) not merely of the presence of God (or Mwari), but of his active guidance and leadership through a difficult journey (Rogerson 1976:44).

The Lemba (and other people) express their desire to find out who they are by telling a story about how they came to be what they are and where they came from. Myth is thus a source that provides a sense of identity. Moreover, myth is given additional impact when one’s identity and destiny is expressed in terms of the unseen world (Smart 1995:89) – such as the guidance by a star, the *ngoma lungundu*. The main stories of the Lemba are considered truthful ac-

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<sup>33</sup> In discussing the prescriptions for cleanness, the Mishnah says that “the lute (*batnon*), the *niktomon* and the drum (*‘erus*’) are susceptible to uncleanness” (especially at weddings - Sendrey 1969:407, 412 see footnote 698).

counts of what happened in their past in answer to ignorance, doubt and disbelief (cf. Bascon 1965:4).

The similarities between the myths of the various groups (Lemba and proto-Israelite groups) are remarkable. The age or the historical accuracy of the stories is not of importance here. What is important is what they believed and what formed part of their world-view. Both groups express their experience by means of these stories. Why many elements of the stories were only conveyed much later is also uncertain. Nevertheless, these traditions have both historical and religious significance.

Henige (1974:191) notes that no one who has worked extensively with oral materials will deny their value as historical sources. Oral history gives us some very distinctive kinds of expression, some personal and some culture-based. The people themselves have passed on in oral tradition a very perceptive set of observations about important events and the relationship of those occurrences to their group (Toelken 1996:400-402). Toelken says: "Oral history represents the feelings and values of the people accurately: what events are worth remembering and retelling?" The Lembas' recollection of how they migrated from the Promised Land to Africa or that of early Israel's journey from Africa to the Promised Land, are often more vivid in the dramatisation of *why* and *how* than in the accuracy of *who* and *when*.

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D:G The Rev Father X Marimazhira (priest, Roman Catholic Church), Zvishavane,  
Zimbabwe, April 1996.

D:O Tinos Mutazu, (Imam, Muslim centre), Chinyika, Zimbabwe, July 1997.

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