

**A word from the newly appointed Book Review Editor for New Contree 2007:**

*Dear Colleagues*

*Allow me to introduce myself as Cornelius Thomas, newly appointed book review editor of New Contree. I am the current director of the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS) of the University of Fort Hare, and also a published author, historian, archivist, curator, and journalist. You are invited to forward me books that fit into New Contree's thematic specialism, either through the journal or directly to Dr Cornelius Thomas, NAHECS, University of Fort Hare, Private Bag X1314, Alice 5700. These books will be reviewed by appropriately qualified theme specialists.*

*Cornelius Thomas*

**Book review**

***The Lemba: A lost tribe of Israel in southern Africa? (2003)***

**by Magdel le Roux**

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In her book, *The Lemba: A lost tribe of Israel in southern Africa?* (2003), le Roux enters into the theological or religious discourse on “the lost tribes of Israel” from an approach underpinned by Christian historical-missiological presuppositions. This discourse already appeared in her article, “African ‘Jews’ for Jesus: A preliminary investigation into the Semitic origins and missionary initiatives of some Lemba communities in southern Africa”.<sup>1</sup> Later on she embarked on a project on this subject with a group of other researchers that resulted in an article: “Y Chromosomes travelling south: the Cohen Modal Haplotype and the origins of the Lemba – the ‘Black Jews of Southern

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1 M Le Roux, African “Jews” for Jesus: A preliminary investigation into the Semitic origins and missionary initiatives of some Lemba communities in southern Africa, *Missionalia*, 25 (4), 1997, pp. 493-510.

Africa”.<sup>2</sup> She further published some chapters of the current book as articles: (1) Chapter Three, “Conflicting accounts of the possible Semitic history and origins of the Lemba” appears in *Religion and Theology* as “In search of the origin of the merchants of Sena”;<sup>3</sup> (2) Chapter Four, “Social practices of the Lemba and early Israel”, appears in *Exchange* as “Transmission of tradition through song, recitation and prayer in Lemba communities”;<sup>4</sup> and (3) Chapter Five, “Religious experience among the Lemba and in early Israel”, also appears in *Religion and Theology* as “Lemba Religion: Ancient Judaism or evolving Lemba traditions?”.<sup>5</sup>

Le Roux engages the discourse in a scholarly fashion with a broader scope. She collected data from various disciplines: history, biblical studies, anthropology, religion, linguistics and the field of human genetics. In her work, the author ends each chapter with an evaluation.

The book is outlined in ten chapters:

- *Chapter One* is an introduction in which the author justifies the source of her interest to study the Lemba. She states her methodology which she confines to the realm of qualitative research design. It is also in the same chapter that she mentions the purpose of her project as that of understanding “the motives and beliefs behind Lemba customs and practices;”<sup>6</sup> and searches to understand “the relevance of the Old Testament in Africa”<sup>7</sup> with special reference to the Lemba in comparison to early Israel. The latter part of her purpose takes dominance in her work.
- *Chapter Two* contains an ambiguous if not misleading title: “Some ways in which the Old Testament was received in Africa”.<sup>8</sup> The picture painted in the chapter portrays groups of people listed as though they received the Old Testament document and/or teachings from the missionaries, then started shifting religious *cum* cultural positions. However, it traces a number of observational findings of missionary theorists who came across African nations including

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2 MG Thomas, T Parfitt, DA Weiss, K Skorecki, JF Wilson, M le Roux, N Bradman, DB Goldstein, “Y Chromosomes Traveling South: The Cohen Modal Haplotype and the Origins of the Lemba—the “Black Jews of Southern Africa”, *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 66, 2000, pp. 674-686.

3 M Le Roux, “In search of the origin of the merchants of Sena”, *Religion and Theology*, 10(1), 2003, pp. 25-50.

4 M Le Roux, “Transmission of tradition through song, recitation and prayer in Lemba communities”, *Exchange*, 29(4), 2000, pp. 331-352.

5 M Le Roux, “Lemba Religion: Ancient Judaism or evolving Lemba traditions?”, *Religion & Theology*, 11(3 & 4), 2004, pp. 313-330.

6 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* (Pretoria, University of South Africa), (2003), p. 2.

7 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, p. 8.

8 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 13-30.

the Lemba. The chapter's conclusion ignores the point that the Lemba had already indicated Jewish/Israelite identity long before Christian missionaries and priests came to the south-eastern coast of Africa and southern Africa. And at the time when Europeans arrived at Sofala, the Lemba were not able to read or speak English, Portuguese, or Dutch.

- *Chapter Three* is entitled: “Conflicting accounts of the possible Semitic history and origins of the Lemba”. In the chapter the author attempts to reconstruct details of the history and customs of the Lemba as recorded by various writers – ranging from anthropologist to missionaries and explorers. The intention of the chapter seems to be to investigate and establish the Lemba Semitic connection. In evaluation at the end of the chapter, the author raises the problem of a lack of consensus among authors studying Lemba. Consensus could not be expected since many of these authors were bound by a subject-object approach to research in places that would have required participant-research answers. It is common knowledge that the wave of European racial fantasies of that time endorsed by evolutionary scientific racism would not create a good environment for consensual view on the Lemba. Even if the Lemba were to claim Israelite-Yemenite origins, they were not going to get approval so easily.
- *Chapter Four* is a comparative study of “social practices of the Lemba and early Israel”.<sup>9</sup> Le Roux attempts to take an in-depth look at dietary laws, rituals, marital practices, burial customs, professional skills, life and institutions within Lemba community. She concludes that there is some correlation between Lemba and early Israelite practices. In the process, however, she overemphasizes fraternal protection as the reason for maintaining social laws. This amounts to a reduction of what should explain a lot about a group of people who have managed to live and practice such traditions for more than 2 500 years.
- *Chapter Five's* title is “Religious experience among the Lemba and in early Israel”<sup>10</sup>. Here Le Roux discusses the Lemba conception of deity, piety, sacred places, covenant, customs, and ancestors using early Israel as a comparative variable or control. Certainly she encounters the Lemba conception that is affected by syncretism due to various religio-social influences: Islam, Christianity, and traditional religions in Africa. She compares the Lemba encounter with host nations' religious beliefs with how Israel's religious and cultural development was also influenced by Canaanite religions. The chapter also contains other issues like the role of nature in religious spaces – pin-pointing the mountain-river duo and other features.

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<sup>9</sup> M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 79-116.

<sup>10</sup> M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 116-150.

- *Chapter Six* is about “Myth among the Lemba and in early Israel”.<sup>11</sup> The chapter deals with Lemba myth versus that of early Israel in a comparative manner – relating to creation, the origin of the Lemba, the role of celestial bodies in human life (e.g. stars, the moon, etc.), the Ark of the Covenant, and the crossing of the sea.
- *Chapter Seven* addresses “Rites among the Lemba and in early Israel”.<sup>12</sup> The author explores rites of passage among the Lemba in comparison with early Israel – focusing on circumcision, sacrifices, initiation, and feasts.
- *Chapter Eight* focuses on “Law and ethics among the Lemba and early Israel”<sup>13</sup> – which is also the title to the chapter. In the chapter Le Roux discusses Lemba law and ethics indicating their basis and their possible similarity to the Old Testament.
- *Chapter Nine* deals with oral cultures of the Lemba and ancient Israel. Very central to it are oral transmission of tradition and the role of oral culture.
- *Chapter Ten* provides a conclusion where the author tries to give a summary of her findings – specifically stating her position concerning the Lemba that they are “not a regular Judaizing group and no specific religious shift was made in their case”.<sup>14</sup>

This is a worthwhile book that attempts to link the Old Testament with communities in Africa but it also has a lot of faults and/or shortcomings that raise serious questions about its methodology and content. Le Roux’s argument of the Lemba as a pre-rabbinic community is correct and sound. However, the Lemba issue is brought into her study in an almost accidental manner in relation to the discussion as a whole.

In the first place, a close look at the content of the book compels one to argue that le Roux lost the choice of discourse that goes hand-in-hand with the Lemba case. Lemba people, according to their oral history, do not fit into the discourse of the ten tribes of Israel; rather they can only be referred to as part of the Judean region. If names, people and places mean anything to research, then the featuring of the Lemba people in the book is an accidental citation. Names such as Buba (corrupt transliteration of Judah) cannot be related to the post-Solomonic northern kingdom of Israel in dispersion – to which the discourse of the lost tribes of Israel originated – if the Lemba claim

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11 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 151-161.

12 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 162-190.

13 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 191-209.

14 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, p. 242.

to have come from Judea. One continues to question le Roux's specifications as to how does early Israel and the discourse of the lost tribes connect. If by "early Israel" she meant the period before the divided and/or post-Solomonic period, then there is a problem with the correlation of the discourse and the time. Definitely she is referring to a post-Solomonic Israel – which was the northern kingdom of Israel. If that is the case, then it does not agree with the oral history of the Lemba. In her comparative study, she does not stipulate which early Israel is she referring – is it pre-monarchic through the process of statehood from Saul, David, and Solomon or some other period.

The author also raises issues of "authentic Judaism"<sup>15</sup> and where the Lemba fit in since they converted to Christianity<sup>16</sup> in the second and following chapters. Not all Lembas converted to Christianity voluntarily. It is difficult for one to speak about 'authentic' Judaism; it is better to talk about various forms of Judaisms or "multiple Judaisms" as in Grenn-Scott.<sup>17</sup> The dynamics of colonial conquest and cultural imperialism are not clearly stated in the book. It is inadequate for one to discuss the Lemba origin and settlement in Africa without including political and religious situations and/or circumstances that influenced their existence. If that had been done, then it would have been helpful to le Roux not to conclude that Lemba religion evolved from missionary teachings, Islam, and African cultural traditions. For in many ways they have always rejected the designation that they are Muslims.

The issue of the "cult of the ancestry" which Le Roux highlights as the major difference is not new among Jewish communities. Her highlighting borders with general tendency of early European missionary misinterpretations who distorted the concept of relationship between the dead and the living due to their cultural biases. Most of such interpretations were based on observation without engagement or participation of interviewees.

The handling of translation causes the book to misrepresent her interviewees and loses the idea of seeking answers to questions about truth and explanation with the ultimate goal of understanding. If she goes by the basic principle of the Lemba people as a very secretive community, patrilineal and exclusive, then she overlooked many things. Firstly she overlooked the issue of secrecy, namely that Lemba people do not tell their secrets to strangers. Throughout

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15 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, pp. 14-15.

16 M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, p. 15.

17 D Grenn-Scott, "For she is a tree of life: Shared roots connecting women to deity", (PhD Dissertation, San Francisco, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2002), pp. 26-44.

the book what the author knows about the community is not revealed. Instead le Roux was misled in many ways because she was a stranger to them. Furthermore, le Roux overlooked the question of gender accommodation. She was not correctly informed because she was a woman. The best example is on page 163. The song is never sung during circumcision lodge.<sup>18</sup> Actually the whole song was used for passing time during beer drinking. The idea was not to give correct information to strangers. The translator of the song completely misled the writer. The word “here” is a Shona word for asking and/or sometimes meaning an exclamation. The word was translated as meaning “holy” just because is next to the name Maria. Then the author’s translator probably thought that it is supposed to mean “holy Maria”. Lemba songs never contained New Testament ideas. The following song on page 164 is not merely untranslatable; it is a secret song meant for men. The second song le Roux recorded was usually sung by women. The term “Mwenye”<sup>19</sup> is confused with “mwenje”. The latter’s translation is imposed on the former whose meaning is totally different. This must have cautioned the author in terms of deficiencies of interviewees.

Le Roux does not tell her readers whether she was writing a history of the Lemba people or just a mixture of narratives. If it is a history about the Lemba, then it is not yet a history book of the Lemba people. Certainly it contains some historical information about the Lemba. If it were intended to be a record of Lemba culture and history it has a lot of gaps that should be filled. It can be concluded that Le Roux’s book was a good academic exercise, but cannot be an authentic (as she claims) and/or correct record of the Lemba people’s history and culture as long as it places the Lemba in the discourse, “the lost tribe of Israel”.

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<sup>18</sup> Based on the author’s view and experience.

<sup>19</sup> M Le Roux, *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?*, p. 192.