

Book Review

Tudor Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City: the Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel* London: Phoenix (Orion Books), 1997. 373pp. Paperback 0-7538-0267-8. UK Price £7.99 (1st edn. 1992)

This book is the story of the author's travels in Africa and southern Arabia in his quest for the history of the so-called Black Jews, which had previously brought him to study the Falasha of Ethiopia and which now took him to the Lemba people of the Northern Province of South Africa and southern Zimbabwe. The Lemba live in scattered small communities among Venda and Shona/ Kalanga peoples, distinguished not by language but by common traditions and Semitic-seeming customs, including male circumcision, strict dietary rules, and restrictions on marrying out.

After living getting to know Lemba people in South Africa and Zimbabwe over the course of many months living with them, the author succeeded in tracing back their declared male ancestry via the Zambezi and the Zanj coast of Tanzania, to the port of Sayhut on the southern coast of Yemen (in the former Aden Protectorate), and thence up the Wadi Masilah river to the now tiny and almost forgotten ancient town of Sena in the Hadramaut valley. An account of origins which may at first sound altogether too fantastic to be true. This reviewer was extremely dismissive when he first heard it put forward by the author on a radio programme.

But this book is no ordinary travelogue and the author is no ordinary amateur. It is a scholarly work, with a sceptical and questioning approach to evidence. The author, Tudor Parfitt, is chairman of the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, as well as Reader in Modern Jewish Studies at SOAS.

Parfitt is careful to disassociate himself from the once fashionable rubbish about the non-black exotic origins of ancient civilisation in black Africa, put forward by the likes of Cecil Rhodes and still being pushed by the white settlers whom Parfitt disparages as "Rhodies". He has no truck with the racist myth of ancient Phoenician sailors from the Mediterranean, come down the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, to build Great Zimbabwe. With the Lemba, as he says, he is dealing with people whose ancestry and culture is predominantly local African. They claim only their direct male lineage running back to Jews in southern Arabia—a claim confirmed by comparative genetic analysis on Lemba and Yemeni blood samples cited in an appendix to the 1997 edition of the book. The Lemba were specialist craftworkers, traders and medical practitioners, who may well have acted as masons laying the better stone walls in trench foundations. But Parfitt finds the Lemba claim to have wholly built Great Zimbabwe etc. scarcely credible, and puts this down to "feed-back" in oral tradition from Christian missionaries. There are, he concedes, too many questions left begging about Lemba relations with the Venda in particular—as well the south-western Shona, i.e. Kalanga, in general—in unravelling the precolonial history of Zimbabwe.

Parfitt runs the story "backwards" in time from his journeys in the present, and thus makes no attempt to construct a new narrative running "forwards" from remote times. While he tackles in detail oral tradition and existing literature on the Lemba in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and includes fascinating snippets of evidence from further north, he has no space or inclination to fit the story of the Lembe/ and their "VaMwenye" ancestors into the macro history of the Indian Ocean in its days of glory as a centre of the world economy before the Portuguese conquest c.1500.

That task must be left to others. What Parfitt shows or suggests is this. The port of Sayhut on the south Arabian coast, which served the Hadramaut valley of the interior, was uniquely situated to catch the winds and currents to East Africa, unlike the coast nearer Aden from which ships sailed to India and Indonesia. The link with Africa still exists today: an old man he met in the Hadramaut claimed to have sons who were cabinet ministers in Tanzania. The sub-clan names used among the Lemba today are also still family names in the Hadramaut. As for the ancient people of the south Arabian coast, they seem to have followed the Old Testament religion of Baal and Astoroth until c.400 AD, when they were converted to Judaism by male immigrants—which remained their religion (unless some were also converted to the aberrant Jewish cult called Christianity) at least until the Muslim conquest c.700. Thereafter only a minority of Yemeni or South Arabians in the Hadramaut remained Jews, staying through the centuries until they decamped to Israel in or after 1948. Meanwhile the ancient city of Sena, based on irrigation, remained the jewel of the Hadramaut until the local dam broke open (probably about c.1200) and the area became stifled by dessication.

It is well known that there was extensive trade in Arabian ships, and possibly Persian and Indian ships, along the Zanj coast of East Africa in pre-Muslim times. The famous *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, published c.100 AD, indicates this; and the archaeological site of Chibuene on the Sofala coast of Mozambique (just north of the Limpopo), dated before c.600, contains Arabian beads and sherds of Persian pottery. The first Arabians to sail the Sofala coast may well therefore have been Jews by religion. It may even have been the Islamic conquest of Arabia which made a few Arabian Jewish males decide not to return home but to settle on the Sofala coast. Parfitt has found evidence of a pre-Portuguese settlement near Sofala called Sena. A third town called Sena, which still exists today, on the Zambezi, probably came later. Arabian traders probably did not penetrate the Zambezi until after c.1000 when trade in gold and ivory began to boom.

Lemba traditions record two ancestor figures of the Lemba coming from Arabia—one called Baramina from the city of Sena, and the other called Saidi. "Baramina" (possibly a group rather than a person) appears to represent the earlier Jewish element in Lemba ancestry. "Saidi" could possibly, according to Parfitt, be derived from fleeing Zaidi heretics of the Shi'ite Muslim leader Said ibn Ali, who was killed in Arabia in the year 739. Whatever the case, "Saidi" may represent a later Muslim element among the Lemba, which has been not totally absorbed into the dominant Jewish element of their culture. Parfitt's Lemba informants in South Africa may be adamant that they are Jews and not Muslims (or "Arabs"), but Parfitt discovers that their innermost rituals use Muslim Arabic rather than Jewish Hebrew words. (There are also Lemba references to an ancestral figure called "Sulaiman". He may also have been a Muslim immigrant. There is no reason to equate him with the Biblical king Solomon.)

The Lemba links with Judaism on one hand, and with Great Zimbabwe on the other, are nothing new to scholarship. As Parfitt shows, there is a considerable existing literature on this, but its implications for the study of the history of Africa have been skated over. It simply did not fit in with the "Merrie Africa" version of indigenous initiative and development that Africanists propagated in the heady days of African nationalism forty years ago. It looked too much like the (racist or mystic) paradigm of "primitive" earthlings living in ignorance until "civilized" aliens brought enlightenment.

But the profession of African history is now much more self-confident, with the basic outlines of indigenous initiative and development well established. We should therefore positively welcome scholarship that seeks historical connections outside Africa, especially in Asia. Thus the Lemba might have become skilled craftworkers in metal and stone, but we know full well that mining in iron and copper long predates the coming of the "VaMwenye", as indigenous developments in the interior to the north; and even the earliest building of houses with stone walls on the Zimbabwe plateau

seems to have come from the southern interior. Garlake (1973) showed long ago that the dry-stone architecture of Great Zimbabwe can be shown to be an indigenous development on site, and is quite distinct from the mortared stone "Arabic" architecture of the Zanj coast. But that would not have precluded the VaMwenye from joining and even taking over the masons' guild at Great Zimbabwe.

Where the Mwenye/ Lemba factor may be most useful to historians and archaeologists is in helping to unravel questions of the origins and selective spread of circumcision in Eastern and Southern Africa. The archaeologist Tom Huffman (1996) raises pertinent questions about the "great enclosure" at Great Zimbabwe, and related ruins as far west as the stone circles of Kubu island in the Makgadikgadi salt pans, asking whether their architecture cannot be best explained as the sites of circumcision schools. The great conundrum being that Shona peoples on the central Zimbabwe plateau, where the ruins of Great Zimbabwe are located, do not circumcise and seem to have no traditions of having once abandoned circumcision. While on the other hand the Venda and Sotho/ Tswana to the south of the Limpopo did, at least until recently, practice male circumcision. Huffman looks to the links of the Venda rulers with the rulers of Great Zimbabwe. But the Lemba, once closely connected with the Venda rulers, may be the explanation for the much wider spread of male circumcision, of which they were skilled practioners.

The anthropologist Gina Buijs (1998), at the University of Venda, has noted another curiosity relating to the religio-magical culture of the Venda and Sotho-Tswana. Their divining dice (*thangu* or *ditaola*) are apparently like no others in Africa, and yet appear to reflect mathematical concepts otherwise found in South Arabia.

There is no denying that, as photographs in Parfitt's book show, the conical towers inside the "great enclosure" at Great Zimbabwe do look very much like conical towers in the Hadramaut of South Yemen. Strangely enough this parallel was tumbled to a century ago by the antiquarian J. Theodore Bent, an expert on South Arabia who was sent by Cecil Rhodes to inspect Great Zimbabwe. But Bent was too obsessed with "ancient" times to make a "medieval" connection.

N.P.

References

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