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Zimbabwe's Lemba build first synagogue, but struggle to keep the faithful

by *Katya Cengel*

10-13 minutes

In a quiet neighborhood in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, barefoot boys wearing yarmulkes run around a small compound. Inside the walled enclosure is a single-story building that serves as both Maeresera's home and a makeshift worship center. On Saturday mornings the front door remains open as members of the congregation stream in and out during the course of a two-plus hour service.

Maeresera, the closest thing the community has to a rabbi, leads the congregation. He stands tall and composed, reading, speaking and singing in a mixture of English, Hebrew and the local Shona language. Among the boys in attendance are Maeresera's sons; Aviv, 5, named for the Hebrew word for spring, and Shlomo, 2, or Solomon in Hebrew. Seated in the back is Maeresera's father, Adin, 83. Like many of his generation, Adin is considered a "strict Lemba," someone who takes the tribe's traditions and customs extremely seriously. He is attending his son's service for the first time and is surprised, and proud, to hear him conducting parts of it in Hebrew.

“I grew up being told the Lemba were Jews, but when I was growing up I never saw a [practicing] Jew,” said Adin.

Where he is from, near Mutare, in the east of the country, locals refer to the Lemba as “mwenye Lemba” or “people from elsewhere.” Oral traditions recount how the Lemba left Judea around 2,500 years ago and made their way first to Yemen and later to Africa. They were said to be traders who lost their holy book while fleeing Arab persecution en route to southern Africa.

The Lemba maintained a number of practices in line with Jewish tradition. As a child, Maeresera, now 40, learned never to eat or drink anything served in a non-Lemba home, and only to eat meat slaughtered by a circumcised Lemba. Maeresera was circumcised at the age of eight as part of a larger initiation program that is conducted in the bush and includes the learning of songs and poems. Later, he took on the role of *shochet*, traditional Jewish slaughterer, at his school. It was a Roman Catholic boarding school and he was required to attend church service every Sunday. But the school also made sure Lemba students were served food prepared in the proper Lemba way. It was a strange duality, but one in which Lemba are well practiced.

Before Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, many Lemba converted to Christianity for employment or educational opportunities. Along the way, the age when boys are circumcised changed from eight days to eight years, because children under eight are not always clothed and therefore circumcised youth could be identified as Lemba. In recent years the Lemba have begun to practice their customs more openly, and Maeresera is among a group who would like to return to circumcision at eight days instead of eight years and practice it indoors. Once the synagogue

is complete, they plan to build a clinic where circumcisions can be performed on babies.

Although the pressure has eased, the presence and pull of Christianity is still there. Some of the best schools in the country are missionary schools and it is there that many Lemba become Christian.

Maeresera said that because of their similarities in dietary law and circumcision, Lemba are also a “target” for Muslims looking for converts. Further loss for the community comes through marriage. Women are considered lost to the community when they marry a non-Lemba, one reason intermarriage has traditionally been discouraged. Maeresera estimates that only 50 percent of Zimbabwe’s Lemba are Jewish and have not converted to Christianity or Islam.

Fearing further erosion of their culture and practices, a group of Lemba leaders in Zimbabwe formed the Lemba Cultural Association in 1996. They decided that one of the most important things they could do for the community was to lead it back to mainstream Judaism. Kulanu provided monetary support and guidance. But how the larger Lemba community feels about this is not something even Leeder will hazard a guess on.

“It’s hard to say what the Lemba really want,” Leeder said. “I believe they really would like to be Jewish, but there is a minimalist Jewish presence — in fact the only Jewish presence is Kulanu, period.”

Recent events have increased interest and added legitimacy to the Lemba Jewish connection, including the rediscovery of a cultural artifact and the revelation of genetic proof backing the Lemba

claim of Jewish ancestry. The Lemba have long told stories of the *ngoma lungundu*, a biblical wooden ark they carried into battle for luck. Scholars believe the ark was regularly destroyed and rebuilt and made the journey with the Lemba from Yemen to southern Africa. In 2007, explorer and religious scholar Tudor Parfitt rediscovered a 700-year-old replica of the Ark of the Covenant, a chest allegedly built by the Israelites 3,000 years ago to hold the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Around the same time, a series of genetic studies were conducted, proving the Semitic origin of the tribe. Lemba men carry the Cohen modal haplotype Y chromosomal type characteristic of the Jewish priesthood at about the same rate as that of major Jewish populations. The results convinced the world and members of the Lemba community themselves of the validity of the legends, something some members of the younger generation had doubted. “I knew I was a Jew, but from the start I wanted proof,” said George Zvakavapano, a 24 year –old in tight jeans and a yarmulke.

After the DNA results came out, Zvakavapano was confident that “this is real.” It was then he started taking Judaism seriously as a religion, studying Hebrew and even adapting some of the clothing of Orthodox Jews like a *tallit katan*, the vest-like garment with ritual fringes attached to it. During Saturday services in Harare he serves as a Shamashi, or helper, distributing prayer books, setting out chairs and cleaning up after the service.

On a Saturday in March, Zvakavapano draped a prayer shawl over his shoulders and stood up front beside his uncle, Maeresera, at various points throughout the service. When ritual grape juice and challah are served toward the end, it is Zvakavapano who offers

them to the dozen or so congregation members in attendance. To him, Judaism makes sense. The rituals surrounding food help keep the food free of contamination and circumcision may decrease the risk of certain diseases. The religion has become so much a part of his identity it is more important for him to marry a Jewish woman than a Lemba.

“I have to marry a Jew, even if she’s non-Lemba,” he said.

Which leads him to his first difficulty with practicing Judaism in Zimbabwe; there are few marital prospects. He points out that there was only one eligible young woman in attendance that day at service.

Estimates as to the number of Lemba range from 50,000 to 200,000. Most of the white Jews in Zimbabwe left in 2000, after the country’s long-standing president, Robert Mugabe, forced white farmers off the land. There is a small, dwindling community left, which is largely older, but the Lemba have not interacted with them much. Benny Leon, the “Honourary Life Secretary” of Zimbabwe’s Sephardi Hebrew Congregation, said the two groups are “totally apart.” A Cape Town-based field producer for a TV documentary on South Africa’s Lemba, Jeffrey Link, said, however, that he has found there “is interest in involving them” in South Africa’s white Jewish community, both from Orthodox and Progressive communities, but no real action.

The diminished Jewish congregations in Harare are not able to serve as much of an example, so Kulanu sends visiting instructors to teach the Lemba about Jewish history and holidays and the Hebrew language.

It was from an early volunteer that Maeresera’s wife, Brenda, 31,

learned to make challah. A more recent instructor taught her how to braid four lengths of dough instead of three. Now she makes challah weekly — when there is electricity. Other difficulties include the lack of trustworthy kosher restaurants, making it hard to travel far from home, and the struggle to observe Saturday as a day of rest in a country where most do so on Sunday.

After the service, Brenda serves the women lunch in the kitchen, a Star of David necklace dangling from her neck. She was not born Jewish, or even Lemba, but she has adopted the religion and culture with enthusiasm. Earlier she led the others in singing a prayer in Shona. The congregation was taught to chant the prayer in Hebrew, but converted it to a song in Shona. Other prayers have been similarly adapted, their tunes changed, their words translated, their presentation somehow altered. The original tunes were “a little boring,” explains one of the women.

“Not African taste, you know,” adds Brenda. “It’s easier to learn the song when you’re using your own tunes. To make it comfortable, especially for visitors.”

They adapt not just to please African ears, but to please those of their visiting instructors as well, changing a French style tune of one prayer to a more American version. The majority of their teachers come from the United States, and it is in the U.S. that Maeresera officially converted to Judaism. To be recognized by the larger Jewish community, it is often necessary to officially convert. Kupakwashe Marazani also converted while he was in the U.S.

Marazani studied at the American Jewish University’s Brandeis Collegiate Institute in California. A small, soft-spoken 25-year-old, he also participated in Taglit Birthright Israel, a program that

provides a free trip to Israel for young Jews. When his fellow participants expressed surprise at seeing a black African on the trip, Marazani responded: "Africa is not so far, you should not be so surprised to find Jews in Africa." Yet he knows southern Africa is far from Israel, and it was this epic journey taken by his ancestors that inspired him to learn more about Judaism.

As a child, Marazani attended Christian schools where he said classmates and teachers regularly tried to convert him.

Zvakavapano recalls being mocked for eating food cooked separately from other students. Back in the village, Wuriga has noticed that young Lemba come to meetings when they are billed as cultural gatherings, while the older members of the community attend when they are called Jewish. He believes this is because many have already lost their religion. In that way, Marazani and Zvakavapano are a rarity. But when asked if he plans to bring his three siblings to service, Marazani replies: "I don't think so."

Maeresera is more direct: "His brothers and sisters converted to Christianity."