JOURNAL OF INCLUSIVE & INNOVATIVE PRACTICES (JOIIP)
ONLINE ISSN: 3005-9976

Self-Definition in Black Experience as Existential Consciousness and Gaslighting: The Case of The Lemba People's Claim to Jewish Origin and Identity

[1]Rabson Wuriga, and [2]Joel Gift Marashe
Great Zimbabwe University
Corresponding Author: jg.marashe@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

In Black experience, self-definition refers to one's perception or understanding of oneself, as opposed to being defined by those who do not have the same experience. Its expression is seen as existential consciousness of one's origin, identity, customs and heritage. The Lemba's claim as Black people and descendants of traders from Ancient Israel provoked a lot of critical reaction that led to the problem of gaslighting from those who held, and still hold, that the Lemba claim to Israelite/Jewish consciousness was inappropriate and naïve. Gaslighting of the Lemba is an attempt to cause self-doubt among the Lemba concerning their thoughts, feelings and experiences of their origin and identity. The problem is that Western Jewry has refuted the Lemba's claim to Jewish origin and identity. Therefore, the main focus of the debate is on the critical interpretation and assessment of the earlier Western Jewish refutations and subsequent recognition due to new literature that supports the Lemba position. The issue demonstrates the practices of epistemic aggression, colour bar, ontological othering, colonial invasion, and dread of expanded Jewish cosmopolitanism by certain Western Jews and organisations. Due to the blurring of scientific activity and language expression, the beautiful and sublime, regions such as Europe, America, and Oceania in the 17th and 20th centuries were unsuitable for human reason. This paper contends that when outsiders attempt to define the Lemba's experience and existence as Black people in Africa with an origin linked to the Ancient Israelites, there is a certain gap in the knowledge of the existential consciousness and identity of the Lemba people. The paper aims to illuminate some of the pressures, and fissures shaping Lemba's self-definition. The study employs the historical-interpretive technique..

Key Words: **: Black experience, Lemba, existential consciousness, epistemic violence, knowledge, gaslighting**

© 2024 This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits unrestricted use, distribution and production in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

INTRODUCTION

Self-definition in Black experience as an existential consciousness to the Lemba situation provokes critical thoughts about the problem of gaslighting rendered on the Lemba by some Western Jewry after the Lemba claimed the Israelite/Jewish origins and heritage. In this paper, existential consciousness shall mean Lemba's awareness that represents a recollection of events, actions, practices, and possession of artefacts that impressed the Lemba's experience as Black people. It is because that consciousness lays the foundation for the Lemba's identity: the identity that was deformed by some researchers. This happened when the Lemba's oral traditions that they are of ancient Israelite origin were published (Mativha; 1992, Pafitt, 1999; le Roux *et al.*, 2018) as supported by scientific findings after the DNA results supported the Lemba claim. The Black experience is of inter-multi-trans-disciplinary interest in general and of philosophical interest in particular, because it raises questions of moral and critical dimensions on the Black experience. After all, it raises questions of moral and critical dimensions of individual existence with special reference to self-definition – which is a major pillar of self-determination. These moral questions are raised to address the practice of bad faith when they demand justification for others' existence, social justice, freedom, and recognition, as well as the problem of interpersonal relations. Above all, Black existentialism, in its studies on the Black experience, raises questions about the equality of individuals and their cultures, regardless of their colour and choice of description. These questions have compelled many researchers to reflect on our contemporary situations by revisiting and reinterpreting ideas and circumstances that dominated and shaped life in previous epochs of human history. Such a reflection has brought about the conclusion that there is a need to shift the geography of reason to look at aesthetics, language and science differently for researchers to understand humankind in its diversity. Black experience is of philosophical interest because it addresses existential and moral issues and questions that include, among many, things such as identity, history, and nature of perception, embodiment, and memory.

The attempt to falsify the Lemba people's African Israelite/Jewish consciousness and identity manifested itself in different ways as the Lemba sought mutual engagement with, and recognition from, some fellow Israelite/Jewish groups in Africa

CC BY

and abroad. A voluntary act of gaslighting[1] includes questioning another people's identity, an act of colonialism with the intention of habituating one's victims to a situation where the latter internalises the discourse of belittling their self-definition and preferring what the other tells them, what they should think and say, and who they are. With the Lemba case, all hell broke loose when Amanda Spurdle and Trevor Jenkins (1996) announced the results of genetic tests done on the Lemba in Zimbabwe and South Africa, which were published in many channels of the media, showing that the Lemba have a Semitic (Jewish) genetic connection. It caused significant chaos among various groups. Notably, the negative reaction from South African and European Jewry was of great interest. It led to an intensive 'gaslighting'. Gaslighting refers to the deliberate manipulation of facts or evidence to mislead an individual, ultimately serving the interests of the perpetrator. This psychological tactic aims to induce self-doubt and confusion in the victim's perception of reality (Evans, 2023). Gaslighting encompasses a range of tactics designed to undermine an individual's perception of reality. These methods include *countering*, that is, questioning someone's memory, including collective cultural memories, *withholding*, that is, feigning ignorance in conversations to create confusion, *trivializing*, that is, diminishing a person's feelings or experiences to render them insignificant, *denial*, that is, evading responsibility by claiming to forget specific events, *diversion*, that is, shifting attention away from the other person's viewpoint to undermine their credibility, and *negative stereotyping*, that is, making disparaging remarks related to a person's colour, race, or ethnicity (Sweet, 2019; Evans, 2023). Block (2018) also explains gaslighting as a form of psychological manipulation that aims to instil doubt in individuals or groups, prompting them to question their memory, perception, and overall mental state. Through continuous denial, contradiction, and the dissemination of falsehoods, gaslighting seeks to destabilise the target and undermine their beliefs, ultimately delegitimising their experiences and perspectives.

[1] The term, 'gaslighting' came from the title of the 1938 British drama, *Gas Light*. It was later produced as a film, *Gaslight*, in the United Kingdom, 1940 and the USA 1944 (Brian Duignan, 2023. Gaslighting: human behaviour. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Website: https://www.Britannica.com/topic/gaslighting Accessed: 21 August, 2023).

CC BY

All entails the dehumanising of the other (victim of a gaslighter) – with the gaslighter making self-preservation the core of gaslighting. The gaslighters always put effort into protecting themselves and maintaining the power of control over generations and the application of knowledge. That creates othering, on the basis that the gaslighters see themselves as right and their victims as wrong and needing correction. By creating a view that categorises Jews as white or of European descent, anyone else should be subject to conversion as dictated by *Halakhah*. This did not go well with the Lemba since they are Black. The case of the Lemba's claim to Israelite/Jewish ancestry illustrates how European forms of knowledge and domination are at odds with African/colonised forms of self-understanding and knowledge. Self-definitions that the Lemba make are subject to both the scepticism that biases European inquiry and the misapplication of seemingly objective procedures such as genetic testing. Rather than relying on questionable investigations from European sources, a decolonising approach would recognise Lemba's self-identification as descendants of ancient Israelites. This belief, reflected in their oral traditions and cultural practices, serves as a significant form of existential affirmation. This communal experience carries greater meaning than the often frustrating attempts to trace Lemba's origins through historical methods, linguistics, or genetics. This is because, in attempting to understand the Lemba from a Eurocentric perspective, one is likely to give a wrong picture in the way the Lemba understand themselves.

This paper contends that there is gaslighting that causes some emptiness in the Lemba people's existential consciousness when outsiders to the group attempt to explain the former's experience and existence because the Lemba are a Black people in Africa and elsewhere with an origin linked to the ancient people of Israel. This is because societies, where there is a coexistence of Blacks and whites, tend to live in tension: anybody with a Black skin has to justify his existence and potential capability to compete with a white counterpart for an opportunity of any kind. This violates all possible ideals of democracy, human co-existence, recognition, and tolerance. Furthermore, the paper sets out to look at self-definition within the bounds of Black experience, focusing on the African existential consciousness and with a special focus on the experience of the Lemba people

CC BY

as a Black community. In that way, the argument that is being advanced illuminates some of the pressures and fissures shaping self-definition issues relating to the Lemba people as a part of the Black people – pointing out that there are limitations of the present locale of knowledge with regards to the Black experience.

In terms of its method, the paper uses the historico-interpretivist approach to explore ideas that compelled the Lemba people to seek to define themselves as people with an origin that is linked to ancient Israel or Jewish background. This gives a new understanding of problems created by those who preyed on retelling and interpreting the story of the Lemba people, only to find out that they deformed the whole picture of the latter's identity. The historical-philosophical method helps us to see that the Lemba's oral history is perceived through the lens of cynicism and misrepresentation to preserve a Eurocentric notion of Jewishness as white.

PROBLEM OF CYNICISM

During Europe's colonial conquest of the African continent, the cynicism that was displayed by some colonial ethnographers and European researchers who came to do research work in post-independent Africa made a negative impact on the identities of many groups of people, including the Lemba, an impact that was negative in that it falsified people's identities. Similar cynical behaviour also manifested among some Jewish individuals and establishments who showed the fear of associating Jewishness with Blackness, and the possibility of creating an inclusive Jewish cosmopolitanism (Pafitt, 1999). According to Warf (2020:419),

> Cosmopolitanism is an ethical and moral philosophy with ancient roots and thoroughly contemporary applications … [It] … insists on the inherent worthiness of human beings regardless of their cultural context or geographic location. It asserts that rather than their local community, tribe, or nation, every person should have loyalties to humanity as a whole.

The fear was that inclusivity would pollute Jewishness by those who were not known or not accepted by the colonial system that they were real Jews or looking proper – meaning being White enough. From the attitudes expressed in the process of gaslighting, the Lemba are too Black to be

CC BY

Jewish:, that is, they are not eligible for inclusivity in Jewish cosmopolitanism.

The gaslighting phenomenon is a product and an inseparable part of the human society in which the Lemba live and share their lived experience. As the Lemba live, they have a reality to share. In reaction to the emergence of the Lemba consciousness of who they are, other communities with a similar claim to the ancient heritage of Israel undermine that reality. The act of gaslighting also manifested itself in the form of epistemic violence, colour bars, and ontological othering. The above themes pervaded many disciplines in the 17-20th century Europe, Oceania, and America. As a result, the above–mentioned places became bad locales for human reasons in that scientific endeavour, linguistic expression, and the beautiful and sublime were and continue to be blurred.

The Lemba as a Black people experienced a lot of colour-based inter-personal relationship challenges about their identity as they claimed to be descendants of, and in addition to that, priestly section of the ancient kingdom of the biblical or ancient kingdom of Israel. That claim was dismissed at all cost. The question is: Was it necessary for the Lemba people to take that pain to define themselves as part of the Jewish people to anyone, or are they not supposed to live their lives as part of the ancient people of Israel? Does anyone who finds him/herself Israelite/Jewish have to define themselves to the extent of even undergoing DNA tests?

Gaslighting also takes abode the act of cynicism by undermining the credibility of another person's experience – by undermining the other's self-definition and self-consciousness. Cynic scholarship and literature have shown, in many ways, how they have undermined the Lemba's consciousness and forgot that every individual or each group of people recollects events that constitute several epochs of their experiences. Koopman and Koopman (2018) argue that these experiences are impressed in our consciousness. Since recollection is a human mind's "creative ability to bring back into existence past events and experiences through a process of reflection" (Koopman & Koopman, 2018), it means that for the cynic, the Lemba mind does not have the creative ability to reflect, critically, on matters of history and heritage.

The Lemba have always defined themselves as a community of people with an ancient Israelite/Jewish origin, or descent. Thus, they have always wanted to be

CC BY

understood and recognised as such. However, the violent advent of the 17th – 19th centuries European civilisation was disastrous in that all that marked Lemba's identity as a Jewish people was reduced to triviality. In her book *Genes and Bioimaginary: Science, Spectacle, Culture*, Deborah Steinberg, a sociologist, argues against Parfitt's method of collecting data and how the latter set the tone and pattern of questions. Steinberg (2016:142) argues against what Parfitt (1999) says in the documentary *Sons of Abraham*:

> In the logic of the documentary (and arguably, of the science it tracks), the Lemba are *axiomatically* implausible Jews. Proceeding from this premise is an intensive language of disqualification that disinvests the Lemba as claiming subjects and locates trustworthy explanation in the educated authority of white European science. As emblematized … Lemba self-definition as a Jewish community is cast with a language of suspicion: it is a 'claim', an 'extraordinary belief'; they 'have customs that *could* connect them with the Jews'; do [they] '*really* think [they] are black Jews?'

Steinberg exposes the subtle cynicism that is hidden behind Parfitt's documentary and how it leaves Lemba's self-definition in a tone of mockery and suspicion. It means that, even if the Lemba were to present their origins as Jewish convincingly, as long as it was not in a European language or scientific approach, it could not be taken as real and plausible. This is "bad faith", which Lewis Gordon (1995), in his book *Bad Faith: Antiblack Racism,* describes as an attitude and practice that perceives a Black person as fundamentally inferior and subhuman to such an extent that he/she should justify his/her existence to the superior race - that of White persons.

Above all, it raises questions about the equality of individuals and their cultures regardless of colour. Such questions have compelled many researchers to reflect on contemporary human situations by revisiting and reinterpreting ideas and circumstances that dominated and shaped life in previous epochs of human history. Such reflection has brought about the conclusion that there is a need to shift the geography of reason in order to look at human experience, aesthetics,

CC BY

language, technology, and science differently.

It has always been the practice that the conquerors re-narrate the story or the situation to suit their position and consolidation of their power establishment. In addition, it has become a tendency among some groups of researchers/scientists to pay attention to issues in the name of critical analysis, yet it is simply cynicism. For cynicism to work, there was usage of epistemic violence as a way of maintaining domination and making the Lemba consciousness look bizarre. Also, the issue of a colour bar as the basis of eligibility in any organisation leaves the Lemba in a disadvantaged position. There is some kind of fear of the widening of Jewish cosmopolitanism. It is through the above tendencies that the Lemba and many African communities find their self-consciousness being questioned – thus being falsified. Falsification of Lemba African Israelite-Jewish consciousness manifests itself in various forms of effort by those who do it, as they commit acts of cynicism, epistemic violence, fear of inclusive Jewish cosmopolitanism, and colour bar.

The Lemba self-definition as a people of Jewish origin reached international destinations through various channels of media and academia. As a result, it attracted various reactions from various Jewish groups. To some, it created some sense of awe, and to others, it provoked cynic reactions and to the Lembas, it brought a sigh of relief because it was a test of their long-held history that they were Jews. Traditional conception and definition of black humankind in the world history of the 17-20th centuries era in the West did not exercise fair diligence as should be expected of a normal human rational system. Instead, the immoral happened that the West chose to deliberately commit sins of hubris, commonly known as pride, avarice/greed, envy, wrath/anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth. These are displayed in many forms, especially in cynicism. Those sins of hubris led to acts such as racial definition, classification and human categorisation, based on racial essentialism and scientific racism. These were involuntary acts by humankind and deliberate endeavours by intellectuals such as Immanuel Kant (1763), David Hume (1889) and many others to define humanity to benefit from the suffering of Black humankind (Bank, 2000). The central argument of this deliberate endeavour was that language, culture, and social groupings fundamentally exist based on race. The idea of a Black person as a

CC BY

complete human being worthy of dignity like any other human person in Europe, the Americas, Asia and any part of the world was not something that was entertained for the advantage of the former. A close look at some of the aspects of the definition of a Black person in traditional Western thought shows us that it was a definition based on the conquest motif, and cynicism designed in the framework of ontological othering. In the conquest motif, Black people suffered domination in its entirety and dispossession of social, political, and economic powers and independence. The situation was that Lemba people, like any other black people, were objects of observation without dialogue – leading to the observer's deliberate disbelief and falsification of Black consciousness and identity.

Cynicism manifests itself as a voluntary and/or conscious rejection of any value that another person holds as important: to trivialize the other's value. Gudkov (2019) also argues that there is a difference between cynicism and ideological antagonism or critique. When one provokes a debate on fundamental principles of life and/or perceptions on a subject or intellectual exchange on difference of opinion, it should not be seen as cynicism; rather, it is cynicism when one's attitude can be described as, to borrow Josh Jones' words, "contemptuous, irritating, and dispiriting … bitter, unhappy … defined by thoroughgoing pessimism" on others. According to Frumer *et al.* (2019:3-4).

Cynics tend to create varying degrees of discomfort and unease among people by highlighting seemingly sincere pronouncements and deeds of others and ridiculing them, pointing out that … others are actually disingenuous … [using] sarcasm. Sarcasm is a sharp or bitter expression or remark that conveys a meaning opposite of its literal meaning and is designed to mock someone or convey contempt. Sarcasm may even be perceived as verbal abuse, which bears aggressive intent. The cynic often uses sarcasm as a tool and is sometimes perceived as embittered.

The Lemba self-presentation as a community of Jewish descent, by saying that their forefathers came from the ancient kingdom of Israel via Yemen to Africa through *Wadi al Masila,* was not taken seriously in the early days by European interlocutors (Parfitt, 1999). Rather, it was dismissed on the basis that they did not look different from the rest of the Black Africans – in terms of colour and physical structure. One other manifestation of cynicism is that when Black African history is presented, it is

CC BY

dismissed as and/or treated as mythology (Okafor, 1991). Consequently, there are all chances of misrepresenting, misinforming, and misinterpreting that which is real. When such a situation happens, the Black African person is left with no compass for life. That did not spare the Lemba as an African people. The Lemba's history has many distortions that need serious research to correct. Also, the Lemba's history was about to be re-written when many researchers opted for genetic testing. When the Lemba presented their history (Mathiva, 1992; Wuriga, 2012), it was received with much doubt because of Eurocentric mistrust of oral history and tradition in preference of the written word. Hence, there was a DNA reinforcement to the Lemba claim. It was a reinforcement that clearly showed the in-depth mistrust relating to the Lemba oral history and tradition. In that connection, Spurdle and Jenkins (1996) carried out genetic testing among the Lemba communities in Limpopo, South Africa, and in Zimbabwe. Their findings confirmed the oral history of the latter and it was then that the world paid attention. It happened that seventeen years down the line, Jenkins' student Himladev Soodyall (2013), a geneticist, celebrated the former for his contribution to science by claiming that what her professor, Jenkins, found, was not real: she claimed she discovered the new method of doing research in genetic studies that can prove that the Lemba do not have Jewish blood. In her research, Soodyall (2013:1013) concluded that:

> Previous Y chromosome data, particularly the presence of the CMH in SA Lemba, led to claims of genetic links between the Jewish priesthood (Cohanim) and the Lemba. However, higher-resolution genotyping of haplogroup J chromosomes that harboured the CMH led to delineating an extended CMH found at high frequency among the Cohanim and restricted to Jewish groups across the Jewish Diaspora. In this study, the *extended* CMH was only found in a single Jewish individual and not in not the Lemba or the Remba. This finding and the lack of matches of haplotypes found in the combined Lemba/Remba group with Jewish populations, suggests that the haplogroup J Y

CC BY

> chromosomes in the Lemba/Remba are not closely associated with Jewish ancestry.

Maybe Soodyall (2013) was trying to initiate a move towards a paradigm shift in talking about "higher resolution" in genotyping that would see some creation of a new paradigm in doing research in human genetic studies. This is a clear example of gaslighting. She was trying to cause confusion and denial. One wonders whether, sometimes, a scholarship does not need to have an open mind that should have made her realise that she could have been wrong in her findings as well. This is because other intellectuals are following the route of genetic studies in their study of human history. Soodyall's attempt to downplay the findings of her professor, Trefor Jenkins, did not make an impact on the position of Lemba's oral history. Earlier in his work, Wilson (1993:24) had already raised the issue of "desensitisation experiments." By "desensitisation experiments", Wilson (1993:24) refers to human experiences, about which he says;

> When you remove a person's capacity to see, feel, hear, touch, and so forth, very peculiar things happen to the mind. Hallucinations begin to occur, and orientation is lost. The individual becomes imbalanced because the information that's normally used to maintain mental equilibrium is absent. We are in a similar state when we are asleep, and the mind creates its reality, its own movie show, and we watch it throughout the night. Often, we do not know that we are in an unreal world until we walk up the next morning. Mythology and hallucinations, such as those European history represents, can take us where it is taken us only as the result of the fact that we are not in touch with our African history in a realistic sense. European history is written in such a way or projected in such a way that we become detached and disconnected from reality that maintains our sanity, maintains our balance and orientation.

CC BY

The whole situation brings with it distortion of a people's history by questioning and dismissing it as mythology. This has appeared in a lot of literature written by many authors of European origin about African history. They presented African history as an appendage of European history. Furthermore, Wilson (1993:24) avers that:

> European history's principal function is to first separate us from the reality of ourselves and the world; to separate us from the reality of our history and its ramifications. We will then take the hallucinations that result from these separations as representing what is real. That is its primary function—as mythology.

The other manifestation of cynicism is the issue of *ontological othering*. Gordon (1995) talks about a racist approach whereby "another human being in the flesh" asks him "to justify his humanity". Such an action, Gordon (1995) argues, amounts to the racist demanding "the other to justify his existence." Ontological othering within the realm of conquest entails, and promotes, ideas and practices of cultural imperialism, white supremacy, and inferiorisation of the other. The one practising the act of racism suffers a superiority complex that leaves him/her not believing anything from the other. The main issue is that Caucasoid Caucasian Jews were unable to acknowledge the fact that the Lemba and many other communities with Jewish ancestry are also Jewish. Even "a reasonable European Jew", by that time, had a problem to conceive that a black person can be his/her cousin. Today, a new finger to hide has been created – the law of *Halakah*, hence the cynical declaration that the Lemba people cannot be Jews on the basis of a handful of things. The Lemba people were caught up in the middle of a crude research thrust of ontological othering. The problem of ontological othering is that, when such an approach is engaged, the objectified other suffers much subjection to critical research apparatus and violent portrayal.

Mandivenga (1989), whose area of speciality was Religious Studies, with an inclination to Islamic studies, represents a type of cynicism that bases its argument on the thinking that there is no distinction between behaviours shown by those in Islam and Judaism due to Hebrew-Arabic cousin language link. Arguing against Thompson's (1942) Jewish/Abyssinian link, Mandivenga

CC BY

(1989:103) argues that, “Thompson does not identify a single typically Jewish custom or cultural trait among the Lemba which cannot be explained equally well by Islamic influence.” Tribal othering based on religious bias has been the trend in Africa. Mandivenga and those who wrote about the Lemba, argue that the Lemba as a group want to overrate themselves above what they should be; they are simply Black people who have been known among people of Africa. It is possible that Mandivenga did not seek to give himself time to look into the depth of the Lemba's cultural and heritage narratives without hiding the presuppositions he held about the Lemba. This was one of the ways in which Lemba's knowledge of their oral history and tradition was subjugated and dumped in an Islamic landfill where they would be perceived as people who had converted to Islam and intended to return to Judaism. It is part of epistemic violence.

Cline (2015) argues that while the researcher might be able to describe the research, it happens that he/she is likely to leave a void in the process while the object of the former waits to be understood:

> We create language, art, myth, and religion to help us understand the littlest bit of who we are. There is a certain emptiness existing, a void we all face when we look into the mirror, waiting to be seen and understood. How certain can we be that what we observe in existing, in living and thinking, is an accurate picture of ourselves? It is we who create our understanding of life; we put meaning into words and experiment with all manner of science and observation; we lament from early childhood asking ‘why’ and ponder the meaning of this fleeting world, compulsively, throughout our short time here on earth.

The Lemba's understanding of themselves was not accepted because it did not agree with European perceptions since the latter declared themselves of a preferred colour. Although Europe, for a long time, after it scrambled for Africa and colonised its people, developed, and infested itself with certain fantasies, such as the notion that Jews are White, the Lemba held onto their history, identity, culture, and heritage as of Jewish origin. The idea of a Caucasian Jew versus a claiming Jew who is Black leaves a lot to be

CC BY

desired in their relationship, given the White-Black inter-racial relations. This does not mean that it is a blanket statement to say that all White Jews do not mean well to accept that Lemba's claim to Jewish culture and heritage is real. The Caucasianisation of the Jewish people has a long history that has social, political and economic backgrounds and gains to those declared Jewish people in Europe and the USA as White people. Jews went into diaspora, to many unknown places of the world as travellers, sailors, merchants, prisoners, and slaves before the Common Era - which might have resulted in the first phase of the Caucasianisation process. Wuriga (2012:295) comments:

> Then on both sides of the divide i.e. between white Jews and black Jews, there was falsification of real Jewish consciousness. It is as if the black Jew was told in many ways that you are too black-to-be-Jewish, and the "white" Jew was also told you are not white enough to be Jewish unless you are declared white for the benefit of the real white. That process gave false consciousness to both sides of the divide. It became worse on the black-Jew divide when slavery, colonialism, separatism and colour bars were the experience of every day. Europe's observation of things seemed to have been attitudinal rather than objective as they claimed. The process of colonisation created a *falsification* of Lemba's self-identity. The Lemba oral history is perceived through the lens of cynicism and misrepresentation to preserve a Eurocentric notion of Jewishness as white.

The above commentary on things adds a voice to many other reactions to discrimination by major groups and institutions of Jews, such as the Jews of Western European descent discriminating against Jews from Eastern Europe who were 'not White enough' (Mendelsohn & Shain, 2008:57). Thus, European Jews in South Africa themselves were divided because of divergent political groupings, with Litvaks

CC BY

on the one side and Anglo-Jews on the other. According to Mendelsohn and Shain (2008:57), instead of solving the Jewish question "in assimilation and socialist revolution", South African Jews who came from Europe were caught up in racial tensions among themselves under the influence of European racial fantasies that also found expression in apartheid. Mendelsohn and Shain (2008:57) also point out that during the formation of the Jewish Board of Deputies in Cape Town, in 1903, West European Jews in South Africa already had problems of colour bar in the early 20th century. Amongst 'White Jews', there were issues of discrimination based on the whiteness of the skin, especially with Anglo-Jews who called for the exclusion of those of Eastern European descent whom the former referred to as "undesirables" or "not quite White." They found themselves caught up in plain and/or subtle racist practices that are found among the other whites they referred to as *goyim*. Many Jews of European origin might not have wished to be part of a group of people referred to as racists or to be seen as practising racism or anti-Semitism. If this was happening among white Jews themselves, how much more would they act to objects they would call black? However, according to Wuriga (2012:300),

> The weight of the trappings of white colour supremacy held many of them back from achieving or living to the desired ideals of Judaism. Human nature has deceived us that to be supreme or first is the best level of existence. It is one of the tragic tendencies of humankind to crave for power in order to control over one's fellow human persons. In many times, white supremacy has always been associated with irresponsible and harmful control by exclusion or inclusion through subjugation. Racism exclusions tend to blind conscience in order to act without any pain of guilt. The Lemba, might find themselves having similar systematic tendencies like those found among West and East European Jewry on the basis of nationality and social-economic status.

CC BY

In the 1990s when the story of the Lemba was presented in the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)'s TV and Radio, a member of the South African Board of Deputies was recorded and appeared on TV arguing that the Lemba cannot be considered Jewish based on a handful of things. This was after the DNA test results confirmed claims by the Lemba oral history that they were descendants of Jewish merchants. In the same vein, a hot debate led to dissonance in matters relating to change in Jewish circles. The major question that remained prominent on the table by White Jews was: Can the Lemba be recognised as Jews based on a handful of traditional beliefs that seem to be Jewish? Shimoni (2003:179-180) points out the position among some White South African Jewish leadership during and after the apartheid era:

> [N]either the rabbinate in South Africa or any of the lay community institutions have been inclined to contemplate any symbiotic engagement with the Lemba. … As a group, they have no conceivable status within Judaism. As Rabbi Bernhard explained in a radio talk-show discussion with Professor Mathivha conducted by Jon Qwelane, DNA does not in itself establish the putative Jewish identity of the Lemba people. Nor does the observance of some rites derived from, or bearing a resemblance to, those of Judaism carry weight in halakha. Bernhard clarified that there was only one way that a member of the Lemba group could be recognized as a Jew—conversion to Judaism by formal halakhic process. … The reality of contemporary Jewry simply invalidates Mathivha's implicit comprehension of Judaism as a pluralistic, ethnically neutral, religious framework, which could encompass the Lemba as one of its constituent modes alongside Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. Nor is it likely that the Lemba population would be

CC BY

> desirous of wholly exchanging its own ethnic-cultural identity for the rigours of full religious conversion and absorption into the exclusive ethnoreligious identity of contemporary Jewry.

The position expressed above carries with it a universal tone in some corners, if not all, in the Jewish world. The Lemba firmly assert that they are Jews both by descent and faith – of which descent carries more weight than faith. Trivialisation of the Lemba's sacred times, rituals, and customs is denying them their existence by descent. For example, *hatafat dam brit* is the worst trivialisation that a Lemba man can get from a fellow Jew during a moment of conversion, where a male is required to undergo a ritual drawing of a drop of blood from the penis when he is already circumcised. For the Lemba this is like saying that one's earlier circumcision was of lesser value.

Parfitt and Egorova (2006:60) had an interview with the late Chief Rabbi Harris of South Africa. The late Chief Rabbi expressed that it would be "irresponsible on social grounds" to bring a Lemba (Black person) to a Jewish synagogue (Parfitt & Egorova, 2006:80). His reason was that it would "look odd" among White Jews because of not having "a Jewish look" (European look) – thus judging one's Jewishness by physical appearance. What exactly is a Jewish look? This tells us of a colonial mentality, where the physical appearance of being Jewish is that of having a European look, and this is totally against the principles of Judaism in normal circumstances. In other words, it would be like, 'today the master brought his slave to a synagogue of white people'. In same research, it was revealed that other rabbis were still having right-wing and racist tendencies and would not accept a Black person setting foot in synagogues where they were leaders. This does not send an indiscriminate message of dismissal to some individual Jews of European descent and somewhere else in the world who hold different views on human relations. There are many faces of Jewishness in the world that define themselves in diversity. Wuriga (2012:301-302) comments that, "There are many other Jews of European descent who openly took the left side of the political divide in southern Africa to fight against apartheid – such as ANC's Joe Slovo. They opposed the apartheid government and were accused of seeking to overthrow white supremacy." Those who took the left side are on record as

CC BY

people who took up arms in support of Black political groupings to fight against the Afrikaner government's apartheid policies, even if it were known that the State of Israel had international and diplomatic relations with the then apartheid state of South Africa.

The cynicism that was demonstrated among the leadership of some South African white Jewish communities displayed that they dismissed the Lemba claim to any Jewish heritage or belonging. That display has since shown that something is wrong in the way European Jews know and understand world Jewish diversity. Jewishness has many faces now. The emergence of communities with Jewish origins the world over shows that there is no longer anything that shall be called a "Jewish look", unless Jewishness has become a secret community with certain physical appearances and preferences.

Cynicism promotes ideologies of otherness. Its propagators do not see any wrong in defining and understanding people by the colour of their skin or origins. This has made some Jews of European origin think that their lived experience and survival in Germany and some communist countries should be a checking point for whoever says they are Jew. This ontological othering has already made them bad imitators of their masters. Mudimbe (1988) exposes and addresses the phenomenon of otherness. According to Ali Mazrui (2005:69), Mudimbe and Said are whistle-blowers to the above phenomenon in that,

> Both writers address the phenomenon of "the Other" in Western consciousness and Western empire. The Orient in this sense is perceived as exotic, intellectually retarded, emotionally sensual, governmentally despotic, culturally passive, and politically penetrable. … Their work on "Otherness" seems calculated to expose "an unholy alliance between the Enlightenment and colonialism.

This is what appears to have happened, in that after Jews who found themselves in Europe, either by slavery, emigration, or on trade, they assimilated into the cultures of Europe which did not have moral strength to accept that Africans or Black people are also human.

CC BY

Spivak (1988), in her publication, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", uses the term 'subaltern' as a collective name to refer to the lowest class of the social hierarchy in a society. These are the marginalised of society who are defined by the elite classes of society. Also central to this publication by Spivak is the concept of epistemic violence. According to Bartels *et al.* (2019), it was Spivak who introduced the concept of epistemic violence to postcolonial studies when she argued that the major problem of the subaltern (the poor and the most marginalised), those from the Third World countries, is that they are divided by gender, culture, class, religion, castes, etc. Furthermore, she says that the subalterns do not have a voice in society and are not able to affect any policy debates or making in their own words since they are not stakeholders. The subaltern cannot define themselves in their own words because they cannot represent themselves in their own language (Spivak, 1988). Once the subaltern attempt to do self-definition, they are gaslit to inferiority as a people with no access to hegemonic power, due to restrictions caused by their cultural and linguistic exclusivity. In that exclusivity, the subaltern are not a unified subject. This is similar to the Lemba experience. When the Lemba claimed Jewish origins, they were obstructed, annulled, and undermined by fellow Jewish figures of power and shared class. Spivak (1988) explains that such actions show an intention of complete obliteration of any hints of the original and replace it with what the former considers to be appropriate. Could this have been fear of an inclusive Israelite/Jewish cosmopolitanism?

FEAR OF AN INCLUSIVE ISRAELITE/JEWISH COSMOPOLITANISM

Cosmopolitanism as a concept has a two-pronged meaning, based on a distinction between political and ethical cosmopolitanism. To understand Jewish cosmopolitanism, it is important to understand the Jewish people's history of dispersion into different parts of the world as the starting point of its inception or creation. The experience of the Lemba as one of the many communities with Jewish origins added a new element on the discourse on Jewishness – that Jewishness has many faces now since people of Jewish origins were spread all over the world. The Lemba were part of this spread. It is an element that brought a new way of looking at Jewish cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitanism in general. Miller and Ury (2010:320) give the origin of the concept cosmopolitanism as Greek and the tension within:

CC BY

> Of Greek origin, the word 'cosmopolitan' encapsulates the tension between global and local, universal and particular. Ordinarily, the 'universe' (kosmos) and the 'city' (polis) stand in opposition to one another, the former encompassing all of humanity, the latter limited to a specific (and localised) sub-group thereof. Cosmopolitanism, however, is predicated on the assumption that the local and the global can somehow be reconciled, with the 'cosmopolitan' – literally, 'a citizen of the world' – serving as a mediator between the two.

Gillian Brock (2015) describes the concept of cosmopolitanism in political theory as the conviction that everyone deserves the same amount of respect and decency, regardless of their citizenship or other ties. Delanty and Macnik (2015) also explain the concept of cosmopolitanism as an ethical position in which people communicate and comprehend one another. Additionally, it is becoming more widely seen as manifested in cultural phenomena, such as identities and lifestyles. Cosmopolitanism tradition is inherent in the history of Jewish people: they travelled to different places, first as nomads looking for greener pastures, and later as emigrants and traders, as refugees and slaves. While each Jewish community has its particular experience, all Jews have something universal, that of a common origin.

Jewish cosmopolitanism is widening and as a result, it can cause "Jewishness" in the European sense to disappear because more communities are emerging, presenting different Jewish experiences other than that of the Holocaust in the Germany of the 1940s. We have Black Jews (Judios Negros) in Brazil, the Lemba in southern Africa, and in Oceania, and many others, and all have different lived experiences. Jewish history and lived experience for many a time have not been understood as involving Jews from lands other than those that came from Europe with narrations of gory events like the German genocide. The danger is that this becomes the kind of Jewishness that will disappear, in that it is the Jewishness that sees being Jewish through the eyes of those of European descent. Looking at the Babylonian and successive dispersions, one sees people of ancient Israelite descent going all over the

CC BY

known and unknown world. Because of dispersion, Jews or descendants of those who were Jews from the ancient kingdom of Israel are found all over the world in every colour, size, shape, religion, and speaking every language at their disposal or of their interest. That also resulted in Jewish cosmopolitanism having both universalistic and particularistic characteristics (Tabener, 2016). The dispersion widened Jewish cosmopolitanism in Europe and elsewhere, which first saw Jewishness as having experienced the Holocaust moment in Germany and Eastern Europe. As European Jews were made to believe that they were the only Jews left in the world and they are White, any other group of people claiming to be any portion of Jewish history and heritage was not accepted. The Lemba experience in Africa adds a count on studies on both Black experience and Jewish cosmopolitanism.

The discourse on the Lemba as Jews of ancient Israelite origin marked a paradigm shift in the study of Jewish cosmopolitanism. The story of the Lemba shows a shift of perceptions on Jewish mobility and fluidity, that Jews can be found anywhere in the world and different colours, and social make-up. The definition and meaning of Jewish cosmopolitanism reflects the Lemba experience of being a Black minority like it was in Nazi Germany. As a result, it widened Jewish cosmopolitanism in a similar manner in which cosmopolitanism in Europe connected with Jewish experience of modernity and anti-Semitic politics. The widened Jewish cosmopolitanism means that its 'Jewishness' will no longer be confined to the European Jewry's experience but to all who have Jewish origins. On this. Spector (2017:1) has the following to say:

> Though contemporary discourse on cosmopolitanism has celebrated a cosmopolitan subject's "rootedness" in two worlds – i.e. the *polis* and the *cosmos* – this emphasis has evaded analysis of the historical and damning term "rootless cosmopolitan." Under the totalitarianisms of Nazism and late Stalinism, a "rootless cosmopolitan" was a life-threatening epithet aimed at those people, namely "the Jews," criminalized for supposedly lacking national allegiance and affiliating with foreign cultures.

Could it be that European Jewry takes a cue from its experience of anti-Semitism

CC BY

and other racial ill-treatments by Hitler's Nazi government in German and/or experiences of being called names during Stalin's government in the then USSR where such pejorative euphemisms like "rootless cosmopolitans" were developed to refer to Jewish intellectuals who were accused of lacking Russian national patriotism and allegiance? As a result, the European Jewry calls for conversion to whoever calls himself a Jew or to any group that claims to have Jewish origins to show allegiance or patriotism. Such an action in a White-Black situation is generally interpreted as racism.

Pulling out the card of race is one of the most unexpected things to happen in a Jewish setting where both religious and community ethics are commonly believed to have been developed from the holy book – the Torah. That is to say, it is immoral to question someone's existence based on his colour. Mevorach (2018) presents a critical argument for any debate that may be held regarding the Jewishness of any group of people. In her attempt to put up an argument relating to colour issues, Mevorach (2018) has this to say:

> The tenor of "identity politics and polemics" has lost listeners even as the tone of debates has intensified: there is a dialectic of tuning in and out of conversations about whether Jews who *look* white are, in fact, White? The argument, which gained media traction over the last twenty years – a relatively short period of time for some, but a lifetime for millennials – latched on to the phrase "white Jews" set in juxtaposition to "Jews of colour" and "Black Jews." These expressions may have insinuated themselves into the Jewish forum, but they foolishly ignore Jewish and general history. Too many Jews overlook the significance of *scientific racism* in Nazi ideology and among white supremacists as well as the simple fact that in all racist societies, ancestry *always* trumps appearance. This is a central lesson from places where domestic genocide (e.g., Belfast, Kigali and Sarajevo) confounds "outsiders" who do

CC BY

> not "see" physical distinctions that locals presume to be obvious.

Lemba people are Black. As per the above, Jewish history has produced many faces and experiences. One would want to raise the question: Is there any link between one's colour as black for him or her to have intellectual capabilities and one to be white to exercise supremacy over the other who is black? The 17-20th centuries European definition of a person of African descent was based on colour - black. All that was white was supreme and next to God, but all that was black was inferior and next to the devil. Hence some theological questions: Does a Black man have a soul? In philosophical terms, can a Black man understand rationally the order of things and human intellectual processes? Any military campaign against a black group in 'dark Africa,' that was to be done was considered as conquering evil and savagery.

When Lemba people defined themselves as descendants of priests from the ancient and biblical kingdom of Israel, that assertion was dismissed. Europe only understood descendants of Israel to be white, not black, hence the subjection of Lemba people to genetic tests. When it happened that the results proved the Lemba to be true in their oral history and traditions, the goalposts were shifted to the mantra that there was no room for them to be recognised as Jewish until they converted to the Jewish religion. Conversion would give the Lemba a different definition in which they are told who they are, that is, based on their conformity to the Eurocentric form of Judaism, than on who they are based on African understanding of pre-rabbinic Judaism that was ethnic and national. Things have changed: Jewish cosmopolitanism has widened because there are many faces of the Jewish nation now and it should be inclusive.

CONCLUSION

In the self-declared old Eurocentric locale of reason, the Lemba were defined for themselves for them to understand themselves – not the other way around that the Lemba defined themselves for the world so that the latter could understand the former. That prompted the kind of thinking that there should be a shift of the geography of reason to let the Lemba define themselves for the world. It is the world that should know and understand the Lemba on the basis of the latter's presentation of their history, traditions and customs. The interlocutors to Lemba's history about their origins and

CC BY

observers of their cultural behaviour did not exercise due diligence in that the former chose to make an uninformed and unfair conclusion. Instead, they started retelling Lemba history differently and falsified Lemba self-definition and self-consciousness.

It has become fashionable today to speak of human rights and equality among all peoples of the world, but it happens that there are other people whose rights are more important than others. The featuring of the Lemba as descendants of people from the ancient kingdom of Israel prompted the usual trend in thinking of the world of scholarship as something that is not real. This is because the world was made to think that Jews should be White, and from Europe.

Now that the world is aware that the Lemba were subjected to genetic testing to see whether they had links with ancient Israelites, especially the priesthood side, one wonders, has this influenced a change of colonial mind to European Jews and those in southern Africa? The mere fact that there is something the world of science calls the Jewish gene, that alone tells that being Jewish is not only religious based on a matrilineal departure, or conversion but is based on a patrilineal origin. If such a finding is made evidential, then the whole exercise of falsification of the Lemba identity could have been done away with a lot of easiness. Epistemic violence has shown us that some Jews of Western origin interpreted social-scientific data on the Lemba and indulged themselves by showing that the oral history of the Lemba was inferior and not worth probing to see if they are Jewish. It happened that one portion of European scholarship took to the ground to search for the possibility of the Lemba experience and identity to be Jewish. When it proved that it was indeed Jewish, the amount of cynicism that emerged shocked the world. It is because the genetic findings widened and weakened Jewish cosmopolitanism. That in itself called for the shift of the geography of knowledge. With the shift of the geography of reason, aesthetics, and language, the picture of the Lemba people can be portrayed in a better way.

Therefore, this paper submits the conclusion that the Lemba were gaslit and not given enough room or opportunity to define themselves as a people that has a portion of history that dates back to the era of the ancient kingdom of Israel, whose forefathers travelled to Sofala of south-east Africa. The whole act of gaslighting among individual Jewish people and in some Jewish

CC BY

communities made the Lemba feel unstable, sound irrational and not be considered credible, making the Lemba doubt their identity, making their lived experience appear as if it were not real, and making them think that no one will ever believe them that they are ancient Israelite/Jewish descent.

Furthermore, Lemba's identity and experience as a people of Jewish origin were trivialised, with the notion that they could not be Jewish on a handful of things and the former's whole existence was declared and dismissed as not plausible because it was not subjected to a critical engagement in a scientific cast. The matter of Lemba's self-definition and experience became plausible only when it was said in European terms. However, this paper contends that if history is something to go by, Lemba's oral history of their experience and identity should have been accepted on its merits rather than on the merits of external approval.

REFERENCES

Bank, A. (2000). *The Peculiarities of South African Colonial Discourse*. Cambridge University Press.

Bartels, A., Eckstein, L., Waller N., & D. Wiemann. 2019. "Interlude: Epistemic Violence." In *Postcolonial Literatures in English: An Introduction*. J. B. Metzier, Stuttgart. pp. 153-154.

Block, S. (2018). The Psychology of Gaslighting: Mechanisms and Implications. *Journal of Modern Psychology*, 12(3), 56-78.

Brock, G. (2015). Cosmopolitanism. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University Press.

Cline, P. (2015). Reflections on Existential Identity and Memory. *Journal of Cultural Anthropology*, 45(2), 112-125.

Delanty, G. & Mocnik, S. (2015). Cosmopolitanism. In *Sociology*. Website: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0133.xml Accessed: 16 Jul. 2021

Evans, J. (2023). Gaslighting: Psychological Manipulation and its Effects on Collective Identity. *Social Psychology Review*, 41(1), 35-52.

Frumer, D. S. et al. (2019). Understanding Cynicism and Its Impacts on Social Dynamics. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 16(2), 3-17.

Gordon, L. R. (1995). *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. Humanities Press.

Koopman, P., & Koopman, A. (2018). Consciousness, Memory, and the Recollection of History. *Philosophy and Psychology Review*, 23(5), 45-61.

Mandivenga, E. M. (1989). Religious Syncretism and Cultural Overlaps: A Study on Lemba Identity. *African Studies Journal*, 14(3), 103-105.

CC BY

Mazrui, A. (2005). The Other in the Western Consciousness. *Journal of African Studies*, 32(1), 67-89.

Mendelsohn, R., & Shain, M. (2008). *The Jews in South Africa: an illustrated history*. Jonathan Ball.

Mevorach, K. (2018). Identity Politics in Jewish Discourse. *Contemporary Judaism*, 29(4), 412-430.

Miller, R., & Ury, W. (2010). The Origins and Implications of Cosmopolitanism. *Philosophy Quarterly*, 62(3), 320-332.

Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press.

Parfitt, T. (1999). *Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel*. Vintage Books.

Parfitt, T., & Egorova, Y. (2006). *Genetics, History, and Identity: The Case of the Lemba*. Routledge.

Shimoni, G. (2003). *Community and Identity: Jewish Leadership in Apartheid South Africa*. University of Cape Town Press.

Soodyall, H. (2013). Re-evaluating Genetic Studies on the Lemba. *African Journal of Genetics*, 52(6), 1012-1017.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 66-75). University of Illinois Press.

Steinberg, D. (2016). *Genes and the Bioimaginary: Science, Spectacle, Culture*. Routledge.

Sweet, J. (2019). Gaslighting: A Comprehensive Overview of Techniques and Implications. *Journal of Psychological Studies*, 11(4), 201-220.

Tabener, J. (2016). Jewish Cosmopolitanism: Expanding the Definition. *Historical and Cultural Review*, 27(8), 912-920.

Warf, B. (2020). Geographies of Cosmopolitanism. *Geographical Review*, 110(3), 419-435.

Wilson, A. (1993). Desensitisation Experiments and Historical Perception. *Cultural Philosophy Review*, 18(1), 24-30.

Wuriga, R. (2012). African Oral Traditions and the Reassessment of Identity. *African Heritage Studies*, 4(5), 290-310.

CC BY