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Africans Might Have Jewish Ancestry  
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NEW YORK (AP)-- Genetic tests on the Lemba people of southern Africa show convincing evidence the Bantu-speaking tribe may be of Jewish ancestry, The New York Times reported Sunday.

A team of geneticists have discovered that Lemba men carry a DNA sequence that is distinctive to the cohanim, a hereditary set of Jewish priests, the Times reported. The priests are different from rabbis, and perform certain ritual roles.

The Lemba, who practice circumcision, keep one day a week holy and avoid eating pork or pig-like animals, have long asserted they are of Jewish heritage, the Times said.

The discovery of the common DNA sequences stemmed from research being done into the Jewish tradition that priests are the descendants of Aaron, the elder brother of Moses.

An analysis of the male Y chromosome found in 1997 that a particular pattern of DNA changes was much more common among cohanim priests than among lay Jews.

David B. Goldstein, a population geneticist at Oxford University in England, took that discovery one step further.

'In studying the priesthood, we happened into this tool for distinguishing Jewish from non-Jewish populations,' Goldstein said in the Times.

Unlike in other chromosomes, the genetic material of the Y chromosome remains more or less unchanged from generation to generation, making it a useful tool in discovering heritage, the newspaper reported.

Goldstein found a particular set of genetic mutations that was strongly associated with the priestly caste, not so common among lay Jews and very rare in non-Jewish populations. He then tested DNA samples collected from the Lemba.

Goldstein's research showed that the proportion of Lemba men carrying the genetic signature of the priests were similar to those found among the major Jewish populations, strongly supporting the Lemba tradition of Jewish ancestry, the Times reported.

And the DNA sequences were particularly common among Lemba men who belong to the Buba clan, the senior of their 12 groups. The Lemba, from South Africa and Zimbabwe, believe they were led out of Judea by a man named Buba.

In a separate study, Dr. Tudor Parfitt, director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, said he has discovered the route the Lemba say they used to emigrate, saying he was told they traveled from a place called Senna to Africa.

Parfitt, who has studied the Lemba for 10 years and described his work in a recent book, 'Journey to the Vanished City,' said he found a village called Senna in Hadramawt, a former site of Jewish communities in Yemen. He believes that is the Senna referred to in Lemba tradition.

'It turned out what they are saying about themselves is substantially correct,' he said.

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