TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION THROUGH
SONG, RECITATION AND PRAYER
IN LEMBA COMMUNITIES

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The Lemba live among other peoples in southern Africa, speak the language of the populations surrounding them, attend local schools and hold positions in their communities, mainly in the southern parts of Zimbabwe, the Soutpansberg area and Sekhukhuneland. But their uniqueness lies in the fact that they regard themselves as ‘children of Abraham’, who centuries ago left their city called Sena, crossed the ‘Phusela’ and came to Africa as traders. Memories are kept alive by oral traditions incorporated in most of their songs, recitations and prayers. The possibility that the Lemba may have a Semitic ancestry (embedded in an African culture) is further suggested by their enthusiasm for religious practices like circumcision rites, ritual slaughter, food taboos, New Moon Festivals and many more.

During a field study, conducted 1995 and 1997, I made use of qualitative research methods that included participant observation and in-depth interviewing. I interviewed many Lemba people and collected as many oral traditions as possible. In this project, oral traditions which were obtained from the Lemba by means of recorded performances, interviews, etc., were translated directly by an interpreter from the original language into English, while they were being taped. Thereafter they were transcribed and documented. As far as possible the actual words of the participants were retained in the transcription. I was surprised to learn that despite their traditions of origin the majority of the Lemba whom I interviewed had embraced Christianity.

Already in 1908 Junod concluded that the advent of the European civilisation was rather disastrous to the Balemba, because European wares and wire were supplanting theirs, and Christianity caused them to lose their special characteristics. 1 I am mainly concerned with the role of the songs (and musical instruments), recitations and prayers in the Lemba communities through which their traditions are transmitted (these being the core of their historical and religious consciousness), the possible meaning behind those songs, poems and prayers, the possible religious thinking they reflect

1 H.A. Junod, The Balemba of the Zoutpansberg (Transvaal), Folk-Lore 19 (1908) 276-287.
and to investigate to what extent Christianity found expression in them. But before attending to these songs, recitations and prayers, I shall first give a brief summary of the Lemba's historical background available in oral traditions and written sources and then attend to the concept of oral traditions.

**Historical Background**

Nothing precise is known of the history of the Lemba north of the Zambezi, or even of the Lemba in the former Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and we therefore have to rely heavily on oral traditions. Oral traditions do not provide us with chronology and for the purpose of historiography it is, therefore, very difficult to discern between the history of the Varemba in Zimbabwe and of those in the Soutpansberg and other areas. Because they were traders who moved around a great deal, it makes it even more difficult to determine where and when they lived.

In the 1860s Wangemann collected several oral traditions on the origin of the Lemba and observed their most important customs. He reported that the Lemba "say, that earlier they lived at the River Loathe, with the Portuguese, they call themselves the Banyai-Bachalaka .. their fathers were great kings and wore masila (fabricated clothes) .. Earlier they lived next to Moseleka at the Zambezi." 3

This tradition is in close relation to what some old Lemba of both the Spelonken and the Modjadj country later told:

[We] have come from a very remote place, on the other side of the Phusela [but they do not know where Phusela was]. We were on a big boat. A terrible storm nearly destroyed us all. The boat was broken into two pieces. One half of us reached the shores of this country; the others were taken away with the second half of the boat, and we do not know where they are now. 4 We climbed the mountains and arrived among the Banyai. There we settled, and after a time we moved southwards to the Transvaal; but we are not Banyai. 5

With the assistance of the Lemba Phophi (in the Soutpansberg area), Van Warmelo recorded similarly that the Lemba came from a remote place on the other side of the sea, but the informant added 'that they had come to

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2 As the Lemba in Zimbabwe are known.
4 This sounds legendary, since it is improbable that only half a boat would sink. Obviously, it depends on what the boat looked like.
5 Junod, 'The Balemba of the Zoutpansberg', 277.