TINA'S LULLABY

by

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The Library was recently requested by Dr. Ruth L. Bartholomew of Paine College, Augusta, Georgia, U.S.A., to assist her in placing an old Negro lullaby which had been handed down by succeeding generations of an American family in that city who were keen to find out from which part of Africa the song might have come.

The first transcriptions of the song on paper which she sent us had proved baffling, and so we asked Dr. Bartholomew to send us a tape recording as she said that it was still remembered and could be sung by an old lady of over eighty years, Mrs. Johnson, who was a member of the family.

The tape duly arrived, together with a description of the circumstances surrounding the introduction of the lullaby into the States. The details were supplied by Mrs. Clifford Stephens, a direct descendant of the Mr. Alexander Spencer. She wrote . . .

"Alexander Spencer felt that his daughter Isabella needed another nurse for her two children. When he heard that a slave boat had arrived in Charleston, he went there to purchase a suitable slave for his grandchildren. A tall splendid-looking woman was offered and Alexander Spencer being the highest bidder, got the woman and took her back to Augusta. The year was about 1854.

Before he left Charleston, he was told that this Tina was an African princess and had been captured with her 11 year old son. During the voyage from Africa to Charleston her son had died and was buried at sea. There was no substantiation for this story except the information given Mr. Spencer at the slave market.

Tina never learned to speak English, in fact made no effort to learn the language, but she managed to communicate with the other slaves in her own way. She was a wonderful nurse, took faithful care of the two children, and lived long enough to nurse a second generation of children without ever speaking a word of English.

All of the children and all of the slaves were devoted to Tina. The lullaby that she sang to the two generations of children has come down to the fourth, fifth and sixth generations of children in the family. The soothing minor melody has been passed on from generation to generation and the words as nearly as possible have been carried on without any knowledge of what the English translation would be. That the song is beloved is evidenced by the way it has been handed down from generation to generation to all branches of the family.

Several persons interested in this lullaby and its origin have tried in vain to locate the African dialect in which it is written. The meaning of its words will probably always remain a mystery to us but the song will never lose its charm."

The words of the lullaby as transcribed in America, read thus . . .

"A e yat ta rum bam bu wah ke dazee.
Ae chik ah lu mi lun dah.
Nick ah lu-u la me put awah.
Nick ah lu-u la me wa-ah."

It is clear that this version contained several anglicisms in particular such vowel sounds as the long 'a' which nowadays is more correctly written as the short 'e' in African vernaculars. We, therefore, rewrote the text from the recorded voice of Mrs. Johnson and it then appeared to us in this form . . .

E-e yat ta-rum-ba-mbo-o wa ki-de-zi
Yei ni-ka-lu-mai la-nda.

Ni-ka lu-u la-mi-i prr wa.
Ni-ka lu-u la-a-mi wa-a.

This version clearly had a Bantu East African flavour about it rather than a Sudanic, West African, but the melody of the lullaby as sung by Mrs. Johnson in a western modality (as no African mode introduced by Tina could possibly have lasted) had clearly undergone a sea-change and, in addition, the song was likely to have been antiphonal in its original African version.

The sounds of the lyric, conveyed aurally and without comprehension of their meaning through several generations of white American children, must surely have altered somewhat in the process; but not enough to prevent our guessing possible minor changes which would enable the sense of the original to shine out. There were several clues, all of which indicated a Shona or Manyika origin, possibly from the Zambezi valley where the 'l' and 'r' sounds are freely interchangeable. Where a Shona-speaking person says 'r' a Nyanja or Ma'nganja from north of the river will change it to 'l'.

Tina, they said, while refusing to speak English, made herself well understood to other slaves, possibly those from her own region. It is therefore perhaps not too much of a liberty to correct 'l' sounds as sung by Mrs. Johnson to the 'r' sounds in this next version . . .

Eya, tarumba mbambo wake tenzi.
Yei, ndikatumai muranda
Ndikarurami pari wo?
Ndikarurami wo-ye.

Here, at last, is a typical child's song from the eastern Shona-speaking people. The word *tenzi* is still in everyday use in the Sabi valley, the southerly region of the Manyika people and, if the other corrections are allowed, it would place Tina's origin as being somewhere within Manyika-speaking country. If she had come from the more northerly districts of her language group, either from the borders of Mtoko, or from down below the Inyanga hills in Moçambique towards the ancient trading centre of Sena on the Zambezi, Tina would no doubt have been familiar with the 'l' sound in place of the 'r'. The construction of the sentences, however, suggests Manyika rather than Ma'nganja from just across the river.

It is known that nearly a hundred shiploads of slaves from the Zambezi basin were taken round the Cape to join in the convoys of slave ships from the Ivory, Gold and Slave Coasts, although this relatively small East African contribution to the total slave market has frequently been overlooked.

We feel justified therefore in placing Tina's origin somewhere within the Eastern Shona or Manyika regions, between the Manyikaland highlands and the coast or, roughly, somewhere between the towns of Umtali and Beira.

The English translation of the song as it now stands is a little obscure and with the help of a Southern Rhodesian Manyika and Ndau speaker from Chipinga, we offer the following . . .

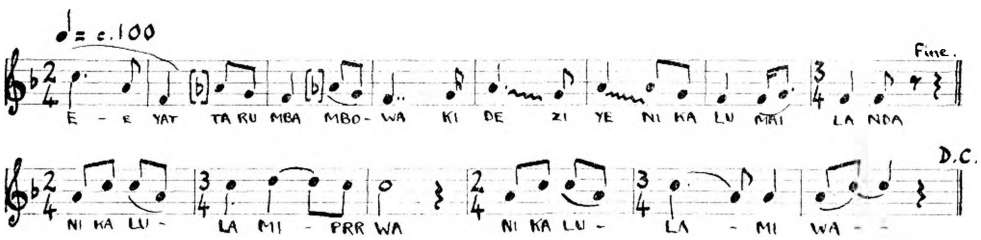
"Yes, I ran quickly to his father, the Chief.
Indeed, I have sent a messenger.
Where shall I go to straightaway?
Then I will go straightaway."

A small child has been sent by his *Tenzi*, the headman of the village, and, no doubt, a senior relative or *Bambo*, to take a message to some nearby village and the child who conveyed the Tenzi's instructions now asks for another mission. As a child's verse this would be in keeping with many a folk song of the region, reflecting a very local incident.

We suggest, therefore, that we have located Tina's home country within a reason-

able margin of possible error and there is little doubt that the old Georgian or South Carolina lullaby is a product of Zambezia. The question now remains whether any African from this region can identify the tune or provide an equivalent song which could be as nearly related to Tina's lullaby as her words. Songs ot a hundred years ago have had time to change considerably in an African village, and we are not hopeful that any further detective work would bring added results. In the meanwhile the descendants of Alexander Spencer of Augusta, Georgia, can be fairly certain that their nanny was an East African Tina.

Tina's Lullaby, as sung by Mrs. Johnson, Augusta, Georgia.
Transcribed by A.T.N.T.



Note: If anyone can improve upon this interpretation of Tina's Lullaby or suggest with more accuracy her origin, *African Music* will be glad to hear. *Editor.*