

MUSICAL EXPEDITIONS OF THE VENDA

by

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THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

An important social division in the life of the Venda of the Northern Transvaal is that between commoners (*vhasiwana*) and the children of chiefs and their descendants (*vhakololo*). It is not a simple dichotomy between rulers and ruled, because not all rulers belong to the same patriline: the majority of chiefs (*mabosi*, sing. *kbosi*) belong to the Singo clan and its offshoots, but by no means all headmen (*dzinduna*, sing. *nduna*) are of the same clan as their chief. There are descendants of those who ruled Vendale before the Singo 'conquest', and of rulers who have been created since the arrival of European administrators, who also claim the title and privileges of *vhakololo* and are generally accepted as such.

The dichotomy is perhaps most clearly expressed by the relative importance of bonds of locality and kinship in the lives of commoners and of rulers and their families. When a Venda meets a stranger, he generally asks his clan-name (*mutupo*), but more particularly the name of the district in which he lives; and districts are noted more for the headman who rules them than for their territorial boundaries. The Venda suffer from genealogical amnesia, so that if they try to establish a kinship link, they hardly ever go back beyond the second or third ascending generation. This is in marked contrast to their neighbours, the Tsonga, who are celebrated for tracing back genealogies for twelve and fourteen generations, and in fact use this as a technique for establishing contact with a stranger. Venda commoners are indeed linked over wide areas by ties of common descent, which are crystallized in the ancestor cult, and by the important network of relationships between wife-givers (*vho-makbulu*) and wife-takers (*vhakwasha*); but in their daily life the most significant relationships are generally those which depend on factors arising out of common residence — washing at, and drawing water from, the same pool, herding, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting together, borrowing domestic utensils, attending local beer-parties and participating in activities which take place at the headquarters (*musanda*) of the district headman.

Stayt has pointed out (Stayt 1931, p. 29) that in the past the Venda lived in villages close to their chiefs and headmen for reasons of security, and that since the arrival of the European administration they have welcomed opportunities of dispersal and escape from chiefly control. It might, therefore, be argued that the tendency in Vendale today is for family and other non-local ties to supersede ties of residence, and that the advent of Christianity, schools, and improved communications are important stimuli to this development. Whatever the tendency may be, the fact remains that the bond of common residence is still important to most commoners, and that there exist a number of ways in which this sentiment may be perpetuated, and even developed into a strong sentiment of allegiance to the headman who is the symbol of that common residence. It is also important for chiefs and headmen, like the royalty of Europe in the past, to maintain close relationships, even though they may be separated spatially. Musical performances play a significant rôle in Venda social and political life, and the *bepha* (plural *mabepha*) musical expedition is a particularly useful institution for consolidating bonds between rulers or would-be rulers and their families, who are separated spatially by their occupation of ruling different districts, and commoners who live together within those districts. The overall effect is to reinforce the solidarity of the rulers and their families and their right to rule.



PLATE I.

Musevetho dancers walk along the road by night, on their way to a headman's home. The man in the right foreground is in charge, but is not the owner of the team. Two masked *vbahwira* dancers accompany him, and women, girls, and other supporters follow, carrying drums and provisions.

Bepha musical expeditions

In 1908, Wessmann referred to *bepha* musical expeditions:

"During harvesting time the different chiefs despatch to each other special dancing-troupes as a sign of honour. Whilst this custom is highly appreciated, it often constitutes a kind of burden for the recipient, as he has to entertain the visiting dancers for several days. During the last year, the dancers sent to the paramount chief, Mpefo, consumed no less than five oxen, representing a cash value of £50." (Wessmann 1908, p. 32.)

This almost certainly refers to *bepha la u takalela* (or *tolela*) *vhamusanda*, an expedition to greet (or visit) the chief, usually shortly after his accession. In 1956, the new chief Ravhura of Makonde received five such visiting teams of *tsbikona* dancers, and he complained that they ate him out of house and home.

In 1931, Stayt referred to *bepha* without mentioning it by name:

"Often one chief will visit another with a troupe of *mathangwa* dancers who will stay and dance at the kraal of their host for two or three days. The chief, who has been honoured by the visit, always slaughters cattle and provides beer for the entertainment of his guests. Sometimes a troupe of dancers will make a tour of the country, stopping to dance at every big kraal and always sure of a warm welcome. They always take back to their own chief the hind leg of every beast that has been killed for them . . ."

"Troupes of" *giva* and *visa* "dancers travel about the country giving entertainments . . . The dancers used to wear distinctive clothes, but today dress up in a curious motley of European towels, cast-off clothing, scarves, beads, etc." (Stayt 1941, p. 323.)

In 1932, van Warmelo (p. 195) referred specifically to *bepha*, associating it with parties of youths who blow *matangwa*, with girls as drummers: the object of such expeditions is to collect a debt or express sympathy (this refers respectively to *bepha la mukumbululo* and *bepha la u imela*, which are described below).

During twenty-two months' fieldwork in Vendaleland between May 1956, and December 1958, I witnessed several *bepha* expeditions, heard of many more, and studied four in detail. There is no record of the frequency of *bepha* in the past, but today they seem to occur more frequently than any other large-scale musical event.

The institution has not changed much since Wessmann reported it. I was told that chiefs rarely, if ever, personally accompany their own teams, and I never witnessed such a thing myself: it is possible that Stayt has translated literally the Venda statement that a chief visits another with his team, when in fact it is his team that visits in his name. Furthermore, whatever the custom may have been in Stayt's time, I have never heard of a troupe of dancers touring without the authority of a headman or chief: even a privately organized *musevbetbo* team cannot go on *bepha* without official sanction. The dress of the dancers has changed, as Stayt reports, but not the transvestite symbolism which underlies it: girls dress like boys, and boys wear salemore skirts and cloaks over their clothes. In the past, girls wore their own clothes and merely carried symbols of manhood—such as an axe, a knobkerry, a bow or an arrow: but during the 'thirties there evolved the current fashion of wearing a hat, waistcoat, shirt, and a towel round the waist, with a scarf like a broad belt and a bead skirt behind; many girls also carry a stick and a police whistle, which they blow furiously when they dance apart in small groups (*u gaya*).

Van Warmelo is the first to mention that *bepha* expeditions are not sent out merely for purposes of entertainment, and it is with their social and political aspects that I am chiefly concerned in this paper: detailed analyses of the different types of music and dancing, and of the recruitment, organization and development of one particular *tshigombela* team will appear in future publications. Only a brief description will be given here of the four types of dance generally used on *bepha* — *tshikona*, *tshikanganga*, *tshigombela*, and the dances of *musevbetbo*.

Tshikona and *tshikanganga* are both dances in which women or girls play the drums and men or boys blow reed-pipes. The pipes for *tshikona* and *tshikanganga* are not interchangeable, since the former are heptatonic and made from *musununu* bamboo, and the latter are pentatonic and made from the river-reed (*lutanga*). In the past, *tshikona* was danced by men, since it is the Venda national dance, used for solemn occasions such as the installation of a new chief, the first fruits ceremony and prayers to the ancestors of the royal clans: but the departure of men to work in town has stimulated the recruitment of boys; and since most of them attend school, *bepha* expeditions requiring *tshikona* are generally timed to take place during the holidays. In *tshikona*, the men move in file anti-clockwise round the women who play the drums; each dancer plays a single reed-pipe, so that a performance of the *tshikona* pattern requires the co-operation of the whole team. There are many different dance-steps, some of which are hard to master, and the sequence is generally dictated by the team-member chosen to be *maluselo*. Few know the names of all the steps they do, but the steps have names and are either directly or indirectly representational. Representational steps such as *u kumbuludzxa ndubu* (gathering ground-nuts), *u zwala mbeu* (sowing seeds) and *mapfene* (baboons) are obviously related to horticultural aspects of the first-fruit ceremony, at which *tshikona* is danced: and abstract steps such as *Vho-Tshivbase*, which was devised by the late chief Ratshimphi, symbolize, in much the same way as the sacred spears, the ancestors on whose graves libations are poured.

Tshikanganga is merely a game (*mutambo*) without any religious associations, and it is not played by married men. Like *giva* and *visa*, which are very similar, it has come to the Sibasa district from the west, and originally from Northern Sotho areas, and is a substitute for the now obsolete *matangwa*. All four styles differ from *tshikona* in their music and the pattern of dancing; and in addition the large *ngoma* drum is never used: the boys dance anti-clockwise round the girls, who play the drums and sometimes sing; after a while they stop dancing, gather in a group and continue to blow their reed-pipes, taking it in turns to come out and dance a solo (*u gaya*). The dance steps are abstract.

Tshigombela is a game for unmarried girls, with the same sequence of circle and solo dances as *tshikanganga*. A modern version of the obsolete *masiavhogo*, it seems to have become fashionable in the 'twenties during the reign of chief Makwarela Mphaphuli.



PLATE II.

Tshigombela practice at Magidi, 1st March, 1957. The dancers in the centre are Tshidavhula and Muthundinne, respectively leader and second-in-command of the team.

The tempo is rapid, though formerly it was as slow as *tshikona*; and the style of dancing is sharp and earth-bound, with feet kicking the ground, in contrast to that of *tshikona*, which is more airborne and graceful. *Tshigombela* and *tshikanganga* are used exclusively for *bepha*, whereas *tshikona*, though it may be included, has more important ritual functions.

Musevetho is the name given to a girls' circumcision school, and a *bepha* sent out by one performs the ceremonial circle dances, but none of the rituals, and the dances of the *vhabwira*: these are youths disguised in elaborate reed costumes, who communicate only by whistling; they sometimes travel round the countryside, dancing, entertaining, and begging from appreciative audiences, attracting new members and collecting funds for the school. The schools have been introduced into Vendaleland from the South during the past fifty years or so by Venda and Northern Sotho doctors, who run them privately with the permission of headmen and chiefs, to whom they pay an annual fee. The recent innovation of *bepha la musevetho* (see Plate I) may be interpreted as a sincere attempt on the part of these doctor-owners to achieve greater status *within* the chiefly system, rather than set themselves up in direct opposition to hereditary rulers. Chiefs and headmen, in turn, have great respect for the power of doctors, and generally incorporate the most influential into their inner circle of friends and advisers: sometimes they make them headmen. The relationship between doctors and hereditary rulers is subtly expressed by two Venda sayings:

- (a) *Hu bebelwa vhumanga, vbutsila vhu vbonwa nga mato, vhukoma vhu a vhumbeba.*
One is born a doctor, craftsmanship can be learnt by looking on, and headmanship is thrust upon one.
- (b) *Hu ambuwa vhumanga, vbukololo a vhu ambuwi.*
Medical skill knows no boundaries, but royal rank is limited to its own territory.

The first saying may seem paradoxical, when one considers that medicine can be

learnt and headmanship should be based on birth; it is not so baffling, however, if it is remembered that there are often several royal candidates for a headmanship, but few for a successful medical career, since an aspiring doctor must have supernatural sanction for his vocation, such as a dream.

Every team has its officers, and these are appointed when the final preparations for an expedition are being made. The manager (*nduna*) and his assistant (*tshanda tsha nduna*, lit. 'hand of the manager') are usually councillors of the sender of the *bepha*, or men who habitually assist in musical activities; and if there are girls in the team, they are further assisted by two responsible married women. There is often another man who is official cook (*mubiki*). The manager can be, and often is, a commoner, and he is responsible for the organization and discipline of the team, and for all matters of liaison with their hosts. The captain (*malugwane*) of the team and his/her assistant (*tshanda tsha malugwane*) must be players: they are responsible for musical organization and for standards of performance, and they must report absentees to the *nduna*. Although all are welcome, and no one who has practised is excluded from a team, attendance is compulsory once the membership has been settled and the *bepha* has set out, as everyone is very concerned that the dancers should create a good impression in other districts. Headmen like to see commoners appointed as *malugwane*, as it offers advancement to those who have no hereditary claim to it, without disturbing the balance of the existing order. However, it is not uncommon for players, especially *tshigombela* girls, to decline to accept the office, on account of their fear of being bewitched: in 1948, for instance, headman Rayhura sent out four teams without a *malugwane*. The most junior official, and preferably a commoner, is *maluselo*, who is responsible for summoning the players and starting the performances.

The destination of a *bepha* is generally revealed to the players only during the last hour before setting out, as it is essential that they should surprise their hosts. It is, moreover, necessary to avoid all possibility of their path being bewitched. (Some Venda, returning home by bus after a spell of work in town, do not walk from the road to their homes until dusk, so that they run the minimum risk of being bewitched.)

There is, however, nothing haphazard or illogical about the destination and purpose of a *bepha*: chiefs and headmen send them out to specific relatives for specific reasons. The team generally spends four days with its hosts and departs on the fifth. The most common types of *bepha* are:

1. *Bepha la u imela* (*Bepha* to express sympathy with the bereaved). From my records, this emerges as the most common type of *bepha*. It is also one of the few justifications for a junior to send *bepha* to a senior: for instance, in 1957, a junior headman was able to send such a *bepha* to his chief, Ne-Thengwe, because he wished to commemorate the death of the chief's mother, who was of his own lineage.

2. *Bepha la mukumbululo* (*Bepha* of confiscation). This may be sent by a chief to his headmen, or by a headman to his petty headmen (*vbakoma*, sing. *mukoma*); in fact a headman often sends one round to his subordinates when he has just been visited by his chief's team, so that he may recoup his losses. It can never be sent by a junior to a senior, and is in the nature of a tax-collection. The visitors stay for two days, and sometimes for only one; an ox is killed for them, and another is sent back to the owner of the *bepha*, in place of the hind-leg of the slaughtered ox which is usually sent.

3. *Bepha la u takalela* (*Bepha* of congratulation). This is usually sent to a headman or chief shortly after his installation. It is not the same as *tshikona tsha u dzhenisa vbukoma* (*tshikona* to install a headman) which is sent by one or more neighbouring, or closely related, rulers on the day of the installation.

4. *Bepha la u tolela (vbona) vbamusanda* (*Bepha* to visit (see) a chief). This is usually sent by a headman or chief to another of equal rank, when there is no special reason for sending *bepha*, apart from the wish to maintain the friendliness of two related families. It seems that this name can also be given to *bepha* which are sent to a ruler some time after his installation. For instance, the five *bepha* which the headman of Makonde



PLATE III.

“Princesses” from the chief’s village at Mbilwi dance a *gaya* sequence (taking vows) at Magidi on 30th March, 1957. The Magidi girls drum for them, or watch them rather apprehensively (note hands held to mouths). The leader of the chief’s team stands with hand on hip, blowing the whistle which is generally used for indicating changes of step.

received directly after his installation were called *la u takalela* (type 3), but four which the headman of Vondwe received about six months, and more, after his installation, were called *la u tolela vhamusanda* (type 4).

5. *Bepha la u li fbedza* (*Bepha* to finish the matter). A ‘revenge’ expedition is sent to someone from whom *bepha* has been received, to cancel the debt: it is rarely sent during the same year in which *bepha* was received, and sometimes several years may elapse between the two expeditions.

6. *Bepha la u losha* (*Bepha* to greet humbly). This is the only way in which a junior may send a *bepha la u li fbedza* (see 5 above) to a senior. It can be sent in return for the *bepha* of condolence (type 1) or of visiting (type 4): obviously a headman could not send a ‘revenge’ expedition to his chief in return for tax-gathering or congratulatory *bepha* (types 2 and 3). In July 1957, the headman of Vondwe received two *bepha la u tolela vhamusanda* in succession from his classificatory father (*kbotsi*), chief Rambuda of Dzimauli, and cross-cousin (*muzwala*), headman Mabilu of Gondeni. He could send a ‘revenge’ expedition (type 5) to headman Mabilu, but only a *bepha* of humble greeting (type 6) to chief Rambuda.

7. *Bepha la u lwba* (*Bepha* to pay homage). This is a brief expedition to a chief or headman to ask his formal permission to go on *bepha*. Each member of the team should bring a log of wood as a gift, and dance for a while in the ruler’s courtyard; after permission has been granted, they return home.

THE FUNCTION OF *BEPHA* IN VENDA SOCIETY

If we knew more of the history and distribution of *bepha* and similar institutions, and its development in Vendaland over the past sixty years, we might understand better its

meaning to the Venda, its function in their social life, and the degree to which it has been consciously organized in the interest of the ruling clans.

I can find no account of the Karanga *bema*, which is a similar institution; and the records of Wessmann and Stayt (quoted above) are not sufficiently detailed to allow theoretical conclusions.

Krige and Krige describe a similar institution amongst the Venda's southern neighbours, the Lovedu:

"The *gosha*, essentially a dance performed by the young men of one or more areas, provides the setting of an interesting interchange of goodwill and of commodities. The main object is undoubtedly recreational, and the *main participators* are not kin, but *members of a territorial unit*. The *district head* is not necessarily involved, except as far as he must know what goes on in his district [italics, mine] . . . Private individuals send it to friends or relatives to express sympathy or to notify a death as well as to celebrate the occasion of the latter's marriage or setting up a new home; and there are special rules for each kind of *gosha*. The *gosha* of condolence, for instance [cf. the Venda *bepha la u imela*, type 1], lasts one day, drums are not allowed if the deceased is of a foreign tribe, and refusal of entertainment is impossible . . . Except where 'the *gosha* originates in a visit of condolence or is sent to supplicate for rain . . . the host . . . may send back a 'revenge' *gosha* to get back the beast he killed for the performers.'" (Krige and Krige 1943, pp. 64-65.)

There are other points in common between the Venda *bepha* and the Lovedu *gosha*, which I have not mentioned. It may be noted in the quotation that, whereas in both societies the institution draws together members of a territorial unit, the Lovedu *gosha* is not specifically concerned with the inter-territorial relationships of rulers. It may be, of course, that the Venda *bepha* was also a privately run institution, which has been 'nationalized' by the rulers; this has indeed been the pattern of development of certain Venda initiation ceremonies. But there is another Venda institution which caters for the kind of relationships between individuals and families that Krige and Krige mention, and that is the *murula*, in which a party of women and a male song-leader take beer to the homestead of a relative (usually one who has taken a wife from their family), and stay there for a few days, whilst the beer is drunk, songs and dances are performed and a goat is killed in their honour.

The *Ingoma* of the Gwembe Tonga of the Zambesi Valley also draws together members of the same neighbourhood, and Colson describes how there is keen competition when as many as four teams from different neighbourhoods come together and dance at a funeral (Colson 1960, pp. 181-187). I observed one of these functions in August, 1957: long periods of communal dancing accompanied on *nyele* horns, which are played in concert in the same way as the *tshikanganga* reed-pipes, alternate with spectacular solo dancing, just as, on a smaller scale, the *tshikanganga* circle dance alternates with the solo dance (*u gaya*). I do not suggest a connection between the Venda and the Gwembe Tonga, but it is interesting to find similarities in the form of music in two different societies, and in its function in funeral ritual.

I was unable to discover much about the history of *bepha* in Vendaland, but several informants suggested that *bepha la u imela*, the *bepha* of condolence, was the original type, and that other types had developed from it. Others suggested that *bepha* was primarily an entertainment, and quoted the common saying, "we dance for an ox": *tshikona* has always been used for expressing sympathy, and the idea of using *bepha*, especially of *tshikanganga* and *tshigombela*, is relatively new. A third view is that of Mr. Diether Giesecke, Principal of the Vendaland Institute, Tshakhuma, who was born in Vendaland and is an authority on the area: he believes that *bepha* is a glorified work-party, and he quotes as an example the digging of the Khubvi dip by a *bepha* from the Dzimauli district; the people from Khubvi dug the dip at Mianzwi on a return bout (*bepha la u li fbedza*). This introduces the idea of asking for a *bepha*, which apparently was done in the past: as a headman had no control of the machinery of the *domba* initiation school, which provides chiefs with a ready source of labour, he could ask for *bepha* even from his chief. *Bepha* thus fulfilled the functions of the traditional African work-party — work, with entertainment. This is an interesting, and acceptable, view of the original function of *bepha*, though the institution exhibits few such characteristics

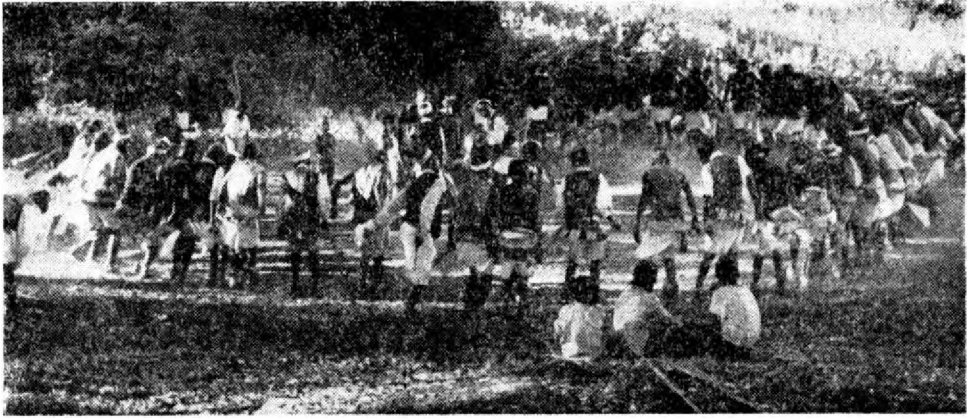


PLATE IV.

The Magidi girls dance *tshigombela* with the chief's team on 30th April, 1957.

today: it is common practice to give the visiting team a task on the second and third days of *bepba*, but the work done is usually negligible, and much more time is spent in music and dancing. Perhaps the usual Venda classification of *bepba* as a game (*mutambo*) reflects their fundamental attitude to the institution, and its more serious implications are of recent origin.

If only we knew more about the origin and development of *bepba* in Vendaland, an important chapter of Venda political history could be written, which would throw much light on the function of music in at least one society during a period of social change. As it is, we must be content with a discussion of the rôle of *bepba* in Venda society which emerges from my observations and conversations with people between 1956 and 1958.

In the first place, it should be clear that *bepba* has a variety of meanings according to the status of the individual. For members of the team it is entertainment of the same order as preparing for, and participating in, an away-match to another school, without the anxiety about being dropped from the team, the urgency of carefully scheduled practices, or the conflict between work and play which bedevils the life of many enthusiastic school children. The mounting excitement of the daily practices, the collection of the special costumes, the washing of clothes and the preparation of food for the journey, all consolidate and expand the bonds of fellowship which exist between age-mates of the same neighbourhood; and members of the team find a new focus of interest in loyalty to the association created by their common residence, and hence to the symbol of that common residence — the ruler of their district. Although members of the team who come from chiefly families may receive preferential treatment in the distribution of food and beer on *bepba*, the older, and hence senior, commoners in the team are just as well off; and when I asked junior members their opinion of the seniors' receiving the lion's share, they usually said that they were against any change in the system, as they themselves would soon be seniors. Even the potential cynics in a mixed team of boys and girls share the enthusiasm of the younger members because of the special opportunities of association with their sweethearts. Thus, although members of a team inevitably tend to associate in casual cliques, not necessarily based on rank or age, my limited observations revealed no evidence of actual, or potential, conflicts within the team, and certainly nothing serious enough to affect the spirit of fellowship which the institution engenders. The journey to another district is important not so much for the extension of young people's geographical knowledge, nor for the association with strangers, as for the consolidation of existing relationships based on locality rather than kinship: in

addition, team members may be impressed by the evidence of fellowship on a higher level between their own ruler and the ruler they visit. From my own similar experiences of away matches at school, I remember how the journey gave us an excellent opportunity of cementing friendships, especially when we came from different Houses, and how we had an impression of an association of headmasters and senior staff, whose solidarity was expressed in the friendly rivalry between a group of schools. This impression persisted even when I was secretary of our team and had to make the arrangements for matches with other schools: my authority was, in fact, minimal, and I was merely a junior executive for a series of high-powered ritual relationships between schools and their headmasters, which existed over and above the immediate reality of our rugby team.

The mothers of the team-members become involved in the preparations for *bepha*: they watch dancing practices, prepare food for the journey and see their children set off; some of them go to join *bepha* on the third or fourth day, so that they can bring their children more food and take home surplus meat from the slaughtered beast. They therefore play an active and responsible rôle in an important district event, and this strengthens their feelings of neighbourliness, as parents of children with a common interest, and their loyalty to the district and its ruler. (A useful comparison may be drawn between their attitude and that of parents in our own society, who become absorbed with the affairs of the school which their children attend, especially when there is a Parent-Teacher Association.)

Most adult spectators of *bepha* get further pleasure, and relief from some of the burdens of adulthood, by recalling the days of their youth when they took part in *bepha*, the membership of the teams in which they danced, and any scandal connected with them. If they single out a former colleague for comment, one of their first thoughts is generally about his/her present home: nostalgic remarks, such as "He's now living at Y", or "She has been married and lives at X", emphasize the power of neighbourhood associations. Senior and junior officers of a team obviously enjoy their work and are in favour of a system which gives them responsibility and prestige: the appointment of commoners to these posts is, therefore, an effective method of directing the energies of talented people in a way which is both fruitful to them and not a threat to the rulers.

It is not often that the men of ruling families take an active part in music-making: headman Takalani of Mukula, an excellent player of the *mbila mtondo* xylophone, is one of the few exceptions. Their interest in music is generally related to its social and political functions: two rival performances of the *tsibikona* national dance may settle a disputed claim to a headmanship, as the loudest orchestra is a sign of numerical superiority, and hence of the larger following; and when a ruler says that the music of his *domba* initiation school will sound better within a month or two, he is primarily concerned with the increase in volume which will accompany the increase in the number of recruits, who represent more loyal subjects and more initiation fees.

Because drums are kept by rulers, *bepha* practices are held at their homes; and even if there are no adults present, the sound of the music carries far enough to inform the district that there is activity at the headman's place. Before the end of most afternoon practices, some adults have come to watch the dance, and in the course of this they feel obliged to go into the enclosure and pay their compliments to the ruler or to one of his family.

Bepha is, therefore, an agreeable means by which a ruler can cultivate indirectly the continued loyalty of his people and remind them of his position.

Although a tax-gathering expedition (type 2) brings extra benefits to the members of the team and their families, it is not very agreeable to its receiver; nevertheless, it is one of the recognised ways in which a senior ruler confirms the loyalty of his immediate subordinates, who accept that they must pay out in return for the privileges of ruling. Other types of *bepha* are generally welcome, since the expense of receiving them for four days is offset by the pleasure that their performances bring to families in the neighbour-



PLATE V.

Women and girls at headman Moshavhanamadi's home are woken from their sleep by the sound of *tshigombela* before dawn on 5th May, 1957.

hood, and by the prestige which accrues to the ruler and his household; and in any case, a *bepba* can always be matched by a return bout.

Above the entertainment and prestige value and the consolidation of district loyalties, are the links which *bepba* expeditions reinforce between the widely scattered members of ruling clans: one headman sends a *bepba* to greet a chief who is his 'father' (type 6), another sends one to a headman who is his father's younger brother (*kbotsi munene*), to mourn the death of his son (type 1); another headman sends *bepba* to his father's sister's son, another to his classificatory son, and another to his sister's son, to visit them after their installation ceremonies (type 4). A headman does not generally send *bepba* to those who have taken a wife from his family, as the *murula* party with beer suffices to express this affinal relationship both for rulers and commoners. *Bepba* expeditions generally affirm publicly the solidarity of the rulers' lineages, which is expressed privately at the annual ancestor rites that precede the commoners' rites. A chief may also send tax-gathering *bepba* (type 2) to those of his headmen who are not of his clan or lineage, or friendly *bepba* expeditions to the headmen of another chief with whom he has some special relationship, usually by marriage. Whether or not *bepba* expeditions express precisely the lineage solidarity of particular rulers, they affirm in general the solidarity of the ruling group (*vhakololo*) and, with the recent introduction of the *bepba* of *musevbetbo*, the growing power of influential individuals: their chief political function is to consolidate both locally recruited groups and the widely dispersed, and predominantly consanguineous, families who rule those groups.

The function of *bepba* has varied, and will no doubt continue to vary, with the passage of time. In 1953, teams of *tshikona* players from the Johannesburg Municipal Compounds decided to go to Vendlanland over the Easter week-end with a *bepba* to commemorate the death in exile of their deposed chief, Ratshimphi. No teams were sent in 1954. But since 1955, more and more teams of town residents and migrant labourers, from Johannesburg, Pretoria and the farms of Brits and Delmas, have taken *bepba* to chiefs and headmen in Vendlanland for a variety of reasons, the most common of which is to visit one

who has been recently installed (type 4). The Easter week-end is the usual time for these expeditions. The members of the teams do not necessarily have families in the areas they visit: for instance, scarcely a quarter of the members of the team which went to Thengwe in 1957 (see below) were, directly or indirectly, subjects of chief Ne-Thengwe; but over half were originally from Dzimauli, whose chief Rambuda, though a neighbour and friend of chief Ne-Thengwe, does not even belong to his clan. These expeditions express, in general, the solidarity of the Venda nation, and the acceptance of the rural political system by many townsmen. In 1957, a novel *bepha* visited our local headman and aroused much comment: a possession dance (*ngoma dza midzimu*) had been in progress for some days in the district, and on the last day the cult-members (*malombe*), all supposedly possessed by their spirits, decided to go on *bepha* to pay homage (type 7) to the headman. This was a unique and strictly incorrect use of the concept of *bepha*, but it does illustrate how a major variation in form and function may be accepted as a manifestation of the same institution without its being necessary to create a new name for it.

It must be said that *bepha* expeditions do not always go according to plan: visiting teams may be refused, and some people are suspected of cheating. For instance, a headman sent a *tshikanganga* team to another, and a beast was killed; later, when a return team (type 5) was sent to him, they received no meat and eventually had to be given meat by their own headman, as their host never turned up: he was away 'looking for a beast for them'. It was said that this headman only sent *bepha* because he wanted meat; but he argued that his guests should not have been impatient and left before he had found meat for them. Finally, the frequency of *bepha* varies according to the economic surplus, and very few, if any, will be sent out in a bad year.

The three descriptions of *bepha* which follow illustrate some of the norms and deviations, and also give an impression of the spirit which pervades these musical expeditions.

I. *BEPHALAUIMELA* FROM MAGIDI, NEAR SIBASA, TO TSHIVHAMBE, NEAR DUTHUNI, IN AUTUMN 1957

Preparations for *bepha* and informal competitions with neighbouring teams

On the afternoon of Thursday, February 28, 1957, a group of girls from the district of Magidi, just outside Sibasa, began to dance *tshigombela* for the first time that year. Many maize-plants were over six feet high, and the first cobs were almost ready for eating. On the previous Sunday, some girls had danced *tshigombela* at another headman's home about three miles from Magidi, and this had fired the enthusiasm of the Magidi girls. On the following afternoon they danced again in headman Magidi's courtyard: they kept a tight circle around the drums, partly because there were few dancers and relatively little space, and partly because they had not acquired the confidence and expansiveness that come with practice. (See Plate II.)

On their fifth consecutive day of dancing, two of the team went into the Sibasa Trading Store to order the cheap, four-and-sixpenny waistcoats that are made specially for *tshigombela*. One of the workers at the store told me that if I wanted to see really good dancing, I should watch the chief's team at Mbilwi: they were always first-class, and in 1954 they had been so good that they were called 'The London Group', after the biggest city in the world.

As headman Magidi's elder sister died on March 7, there was no communal music or dancing in the district for six days. When the girls resumed dancing on the afternoon of March 14, their leader, Tshidavhula, was away, attending the third phase of her puberty rituals at the home of her father's brother, who is a headman: her place was taken by her second-in-command. These girls were officers for the *tshigombela* rehearsals, but this did not automatically qualify them for leadership of the *bepha* expedition. On the following day, some boys joined them and they danced *tshikanganga* as well as



PLATE VI.

The Dzingahe *tshigombela* team, returning from *bepha*, dances *gaya* outside the Sibasa Trading Store on 16th April, 1958.

tshigombela, and on the next day, a Sunday, several came to practise for the first time in their full dancing regalia. Three days later, they decided to go and dance informally at the home of the neighbouring headman Mbara, of Miluwani; but they found that a puberty ceremony was in progress, and so they came home. As they passed the Sibasa post office, the postmaster gave them sweets: Tshidavhula, now back from her puberty school, called out "*Laini, Laimi!*" (line, line!), and they were given sweets in order of seniority. This was to happen many times during the preparations for *bepha*, as I often brought sweets along for them after dancing.

On Saturday, March 30, thirty-one days after their initial practice, they received a visit from the chief's team (see Plate III). The 'princesses' from Mbilwi were full of bounce, and although the Magidi girls were supposed to know of their arrival, there were at first only four of them present! After a while they appeared in full force and competed with the Mbilwi team. The adult audience had an animated discussion on the merits of the two teams: some said that the chief's team was better, and others that it came second to Magidi, but was otherwise the best in the area; others said that the chief's team excelled in singing and Magidi in drumming. The visitors were given some beer at 5.20 p.m., and shortly afterwards left for home, hurling insults at the Magidi girls and boasting about their own performance.

On the Monday afternoon, the Magidi team danced at the home of another neighbouring headman, Mphephu of Lufule: they were all out to impress and, probably because of their nervousness, their drumming was faster than I had ever heard it before. In the middle of one dance, the chief drummer suddenly stopped and placed the stick (*tshiombo*) on the drum, the girls knelt down, but did not *losba*, and the headman's cattle were driven out past them; the same ritual was observed when they were driven back forty minutes later. In the meantime, the headman himself had ridden up the track to his home on a bicycle, but they did not stop dancing; he told me that his own girls were to go on *bepha*, but not until they had finished the task of taking manure down to his garden. The Magidi girls were not given any work, as we shall see. At 6.15, the Magidi team suddenly broke off and began to walk home: they did not want to be out after dark, as

they said they were afraid of being skinned alive or being savaged by the watch-dog at Borchers' Trading Store in Sibasa. Forty-four Lufule girls came to Magidi on the next afternoon, and found no one ready: eventually twenty-three Magidi girls turned up to compete, of whom only nine were in dancing uniform. Tshidavhula was, as usual, praised for the vigour of her dancing, but the Magidi team as a whole was criticized for its poor turnout. The Lufule team left for home at 6.15.

On Friday, April 5, after two days of desultory practice, the Magidi team put up a very poor show against fifty-three visitors from nearby Tshisikule: "these people surpass Magidi's dancers", it was said, "because there are so few Magidi girls present" (performances were generally criticized on the basis of the number of dancers, the vigour of their movements, the volume of their singing, and the metronomic accuracy and variety of their drum rhythms). The Magidi girls showed little enthusiasm for dancing on the following afternoon, but on the Sunday the few that turned up for practice decided to go to Tshisikule "in order to learn better by dancing with others". The Tshisikule girls were practising, and did not expect visitors from Magidi: once again they were considered the better performers, because of their numbers, although in fact there was little to commend in their singing and dancing. I do not think that the Magidi girls were shamed by their performance on the Friday; and if they had had any intention of retaliating, they would not have set out to Tshisikule with such a small team. The decision to go was spontaneous and probably arose from the absence of any audience at Magidi: there was, in fact, often a correlation between standards of performance and the size or importance of the audience. Only twenty and twenty-three girls respectively came to practices on Monday and Tuesday, April 8 and 9, and on both days they broke off early.

There was no dancing for six days, following a death on April 9. On the forty-eighth day, they resumed dancing and performed very well. Headman Magidi said he would send them on *bepha* as soon as their number exceeded thirty, and on the next two days many more dancers turned up. From April 19 to 22, there was no dancing: it was the Easter week-end, and everyone was involved with the *tshikona* dancers from Johannesburg (see Section III).

On the fifty-fifth day of rehearsals, Tuesday, April 23, Tshidavhula and her assistant, Muthundinne, came early and began drumming to attract the others. Shortly afterwards a large number had gathered, the performance was good, and headman Magidi was pleased. He considered that the drumming and dancing had improved, but not the singing, and he said that *bepha* would be sent out on Saturday, but that first he must find the £1 which had to be presented to their hosts. The need for the money was often mentioned to me, but I resolutely refused to take the hint, as I did not want to precipitate any action.

The practices usually began at a quarter to four and finished at about half-past five. Most girls brought refreshments, which they shared with their friends between dances: one came with a maize cob and an orange stuffed into her waistcoat pockets, another carried oranges or guavas in a flour bag, a large handkerchief or a head-scarf, and another brought sugar-cane. I shall discuss the pattern of food distribution, the formation of food groups, and the occasional disputes which arose, elsewhere, in a study of the organization of a *tshigombela* team.

Now that *bepha* was approaching, practices took place daily. On Friday, April 26, the fifty-eighth day, the oldest son of headman Magidi, Jameson Ratshilumela, a man in early middle-age and a doctor by profession, spoke to the girls at ten minutes past five: "Do you want to walk in the dark?" he said, referring to the *bepha* night journey. The girls responded by ululating three times. "Well, we will discuss it tomorrow", he continued: "You haven't gone to the chief's capital at Mbilwi yet, have you? Tomorrow is Saturday: you must go to greet the chief humbly". On Saturday, Jameson failed to turn up. On Sunday he said that they would go on Monday. On Monday the girls came early to dance: when the sun was getting low and there was still no move to Mbilwi,

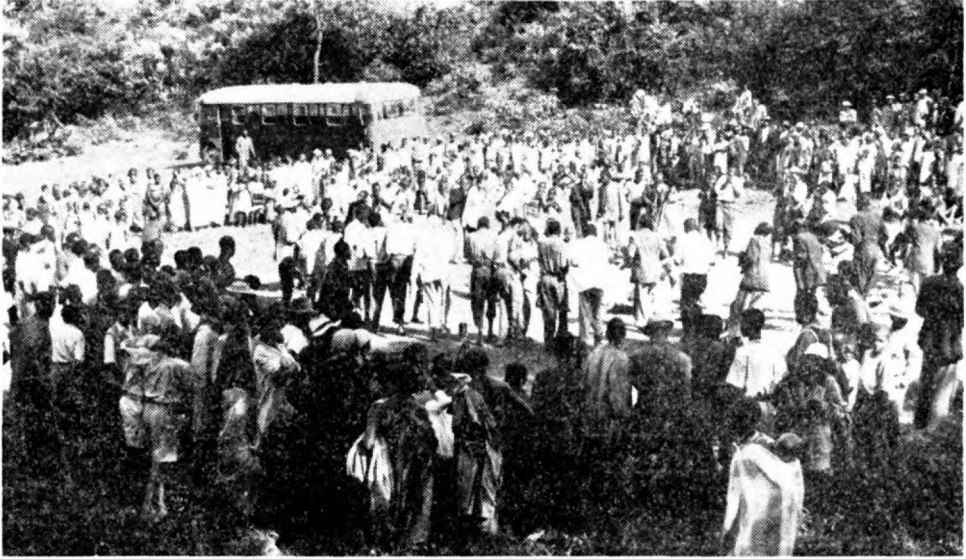


PLATE VII.

Tshikona dancers and spectators below the village of chief Ne-Thengwe, and the bus which brought the visiting team from Johannesburg, on 4th April, 1957.

they received a message from Jameson that they would be going on Tuesday. Shortly before they dispersed he arrived and spoke to them: he said that *bepha* had been in his thoughts for weeks, and that he was pleased there were now thirty-nine girls. When he announced that their 'mother' (*mme*) for the journey to Mbilwi would be Tshidavhula, she was surprisingly overcome, and I do not think her pleasure and shyness at being given responsibility were feigned, as such emotions often are by Venda girls. At half-past eleven on Tuesday morning, the girls began to assemble at headman Magidi's, and at a quarter-past one we set off for the chief's capital at Mbilwi: the team danced once on the way, and at 2.20 p.m. the forty-seven girls from Magidi, escorted by Jameson and Johannes Meila, another of Magidi's councillors, filed into the chief's council-place (*kboro*) and each one put down the log of wood she carried as tribute. While they danced (see Plate IV), a certain man said he wanted £2 on behalf of the chief: I challenged this odd request, and one of the chief's councillors pointed out that I was a welcome guest and that the man was trying it on. Another elderly councillor could not stop commenting on the perfection of Tshidavhula's dancing, and he called her aside to congratulate her. After an hour's dancing, the girls took their firewood up to the council hut (*tshivhambo*) and Tshidavhula and a few other 'nobles' (*vhakololo*) of Magidi's team were summoned to meet relatives and have some beer: this was an example of the preferential treatment often given to nobles, but it did not offend the commoners in the team, because they saw it as perfectly normal, hospitable behaviour between relatives, who in this case happened to belong to chiefly families. My wife and I also spent a very pleasant half-hour, with Jameson and Johannes, in the company of the chief and his councillors, before we rejoined the team and returned to Magidi. Jameson told the girls that they would spend Thursday down at Tshi lungoma, where they would collect medicine (*tshioro*) for *bepha* from headman Magidi's younger brother, who is a herbalist. They did not go on Thursday, and Jameson blamed the girls for coming to the practice late, at about half-past two: "I give you *bepha* without asking you to do any work", he told them, "if you fail to come early tomorrow, I will

not give you *bepba*. Vho-Mungane has prepared beer and a goat for you, but it is too late to go now: by the time you have drunk the beer and the goat has been skinned, it will be dark. Vho-Mungane expects us today, and he will blame me for our absence. And it is your fault."

When we met Mungane at ten o'clock on the following morning, he insisted that he had not expected us, although beer was available, and that he would have to prepare the medicine while we waited. We had left Magidi shortly after eight o'clock, and walked to Tshiulungoma, which is south of the road from Louis Trichardt to Punda Maria: the members of the team who lived at Mbaleni joined us on the way. The girls brought their own drums, so that they could stop and dance at certain stages of the journey; and when the going was difficult, Jameson, Johannes, Malungete (a Shangaan councillor of Magidi) or I, helped to carry them. Several times during the day, I heard adults discussing my presence: "have you ever seen *bepba* set out with a European?" they said. A very hearty man from Mbaleni came along to support the team: he was forever shouting "Sing up! Sing up!" and giving 'touch-line' comments on the performances of the dancers. They danced and drank beer, and then at half-past twelve the juniors were called off to wash their hands and eat some food, while the seniors stayed on and drank more beer. Three of the girls, who were particularly fond of it, became rather tight and argumentative as the day wore on, but they always sobered up and danced well. Shortly after half-past two, we left Mungane and walked to the home of the late headman Tshikovha: there was plenty of beer there, and we had been invited by some of the appreciative audience at Mungane's. Our friend from Mbaleni, who was more animated than ever, but not drunk, shouted, "Ah! Ah! Ah, la, la, la! Sing up! Sing up!" The girls danced and drank beer for over an hour, and at ten minutes past four we began walking home. A junior shouted anxiously, "Oh, my hat! Don't squash it!" as a senior tried to put the large *thungwa* drum on her head; so the senior merely took the hat and wore it on top of her own. The juniors carried the drums and behaved admirably, while the seniors fooled around and punched each other in fun, and generally created a disturbance all the way home.

The Expedition to Tshivhambe

On the afternoon of Saturday, May 4, on their sixty-sixth day of rehearsal, the team danced until half-past four. Then headman Magidi's senior wife, Vho-Zhambuko, addressed the girls: "You are going to visit the home of headman Moshavhanamadi of Tshivhambe, near Duthuni. You are representing your headman, and so you must behave well. You must not quarrel, and you must dance as well as you can. Above all, bring back a good report of your activities in another district". Headman Magidi announced that he had not been able to appoint a *malugwane*: he would not allow Tshidavhula to hold the office, because she was already a member of the chief's family, and the parents of two other girls whom he had suggested were not prepared to let their daughters be appointed, for fear of jealousy and witchcraft; Johannes and Malungete would therefore be in charge of the dancing. Jameson told the girls that they should wear their ordinary clothes for the journey, so that their dancing kit would not get soiled, and that after they had been treated with medicine they must not wash their feet or mix with people who had not been treated. He then prepared *tshioro*, an incense-like medicine over which every member of the team had to walk, including the adult officers, and rubbed medicated ointment on everyone's feet. He did not think it necessary for me to undergo this treatment. At half-past five, mothers, relatives and boy-friends escorted the girls along the path to the road into Sibasa, carrying their food baskets for them, and wished them good fortune on their journey to Tshivhambe. The girls were led by Jameson, Johannes, Malungete, and William Mushome, and by two senior ladies, Vho-Mavhungu and Vho-Nyadzandanda.

Twice on the way the girls stopped to dance at the homestead of a friend of one of the officers, and on one occasion they were given beer. Both the dancing and the rela-

tively easy night journey were made possible by the moonlight, which is essential for many Venda musical activities. At a quarter-past nine, we reached the foot of the hill on which headman Moshavhanamadi's home was situated, and settled down on one side of a fair-sized strip of level ground. We could hear music from the *domba* initiation school at Phiphidi, from a *musevbetbo* initiation school not far from Duthuni, from three different separatist churches that were holding all-night services in the district, and from a number of revellers who were singing *malende* beer-songs.

Our peace was disturbed by the arrival of three drunkards on their way home: they insisted on talking loudly and playing our drums, so that Jameson decided that the girls should dance and announce their presence, but not their destination. They danced for an hour, from half-past ten, and people came down from headman Moshavhanamadi's place: they assumed, and we did not disillusion them, that we were on our way to another headman, and so they soon drifted back to their homes, and to sleep. From half-past eleven until midnight, the drunkards insisted on leading the girls in a number of *malende* songs: they also cracked salacious jokes about girls dancing so vigorously that their clothes fell off and they were naked, and about a number of other things, but none of us were as amused as they were by their humour. Eventually, at ten-past twelve, they staggered off, and the girls curled up and slept. Some woke up and chatted between 2.15 and 2.45 a.m., and then slept again until five o'clock.

It was cold when we woke up, and the girls huddled in their blankets. There was an atmosphere of intense excitement as we walked slowly up the path to Moshavhanamadi's home. We entered his council-place, and no dogs barked; the girls put down their food-baskets and carefully paced out a dancing circle round a tree, because the ground was sloping. The three drummers took up their positions, the girls stood in a line, with Tshidavhula in front, and Jameson said they should begin. Tshidavhula started the song, and immediately the night insects were silenced by immensely vigorous singing, dancing and drumming. Within a few minutes, a group of bewildered women and girls emerged from their houses to see what the noise was all about (see Plate V). As soon as they were properly awake, they began to say that they must organize a rival *tshigombela* team: some girls said that they could not dance because they had not practised, and the old ladies mocked them. First light appeared at six o'clock, and shortly afterwards four girls who had spent Saturday night at the *domba* school at Phiphidi, arrived home at Moshavhanamadi's. In this case, music was not taboo because of *domba* in the next district, since this *domba* was organized by a headman, who has no jurisdiction over other headmen. Malungete spoke to a representative of headman Moshavhanamadi: "I have been asked by headman Magidi to tell you that we have come to express our sympathy (*u imela*)."¹ A definite decision could not be given until Moshavhanamadi had consulted his immediate relatives, and in the meantime the girls were shown two huts, in which they could put their food and clothing, and sleep at night; and then they continued to dance. By seven o'clock, most of the women of Moshavhanamadi were pounding meal, preparing food or drawing water, and only children watched the dancing. The girls had taken off their blankets and were dancing in their salempores, but they had tied scarves round their waists so that they should not reveal too much of their thighs whilst dancing. They stopped dancing at a quarter to eight, and a fatigue party of four was sent off to draw water from a stream, so that the girls could wash their faces. They danced again during the morning, went down to wash, danced once before lunch at mid-day, and then put on their dancing clothes for a long session from two to five o'clock on the level ground at the foot of the hill. They collected firewood, ate their evening meal, and danced from seven o'clock to nine-thirty: the two women in charge would not allow the little girls to dance, so that they should not be too tired. In the intervals between dances, they played a sort of puppet game, *ngovholane*, in which the hands of a hidden person are covered with a blanket and 'dance' to the accompaniment of a song; one of the girls and my wife told stories; and people chatted as they

sat in groups round the three fires — for the officers of the team, for the girls, and for women and children.

Moshavhanamadi could have refused to accept the team: in this case, he would not have received the £1 and he would have slaughtered a goat for the team before they left. When he accepted them, however, he found that Jameson had forgotten to bring the money, and so he made the acceptance provisional: this is why he had not yet given them *tshibindi tsha vbakololo* (lit. liver of the princes), the goat which should be slaughtered on the first day. He should also give them *mulosho* food and beer on the second day, but the Magidi people thought that they would not get this, because of the absence of the money, and they were embarrassed by the situation. Besides, he said that he had no work for them to do, and *mulosho* is generally a reward for work done on the second, and sometimes the third, day. Johannes and Vho-Mavhungu were chosen to go back to headman Magidi on the next day, because two people are necessary for a deputation, and my wife offered to drive them.

Moshavhanamadi is the son of headman Magidi's elder brother, who died at Tshivhambe in 1938. Magidi had delayed sending *bepha* because Moshavhanamadi was not wealthy: he had no daughters and four sons, whose marriages cost him money and cattle. The *bepha* should have come in 1956, but Magidi fell ill and the project was abandoned: this emphasises the fact that *bepha* should be sponsored by someone in authority, although he may play no active rôle in its organization.

On the second day at Tshivhambe, they danced from 5.30 to 6.15 a.m., whilst the small girls slept on, and at 8.15 some were sent to collect firewood and others were given money by Moshavhanamadi to buy meat at the Duthuni butchery. By ten o'clock this had been done and the girls sat down in their food groups, eating the peanuts, oranges and maize cobs which they had brought with them. Moshavhanamadi was clearly rather hard up, and so the girls had only water to drink. They seemed to be much more sociable and at ease in the strange environment, and Tshidavhula was more friendly and relaxed, and less bossy: she was beginning to lose her voice, chiefly because of her strenuous efforts to lead the singing. Although she was not officially *malugwane*, she had been given the two sticks of office to carry at all times, and Muthundinne, as her assistant, was given one stick. The girls at Tshivhambe who were attending the *domba* initiation showed no interest in *tshigombela*, and both they and the others who were at least interested in the dancing, made no overtures of friendship to the Magidi girls. Even in the evening, when there were opportunities to share the same fire, they kept themselves to themselves, and the Magidi girls did most of the talking and playing. Their reticence may have been accentuated because of their inability to organize a rival dancing team; but I noticed on other occasions that *bepha* strengthens already existing relationships within the visiting team, but does not add to them, and that it gives a greater boost to the sociability of the 'attackers' than to that of the 'defenders'.

Shortly before lunch, Vho-Mavhungu and Johannes came back with the pound from Magidi, who sent profuse apologies to Moshavhanamadi for the error and explained that Jameson had been drunk when he left: the Venda regard drunkenness as an acceptable excuse for most deviant or neglectful behaviour. Magidi was also glad to hear that the girls were doing well: he sent his greetings and a reminder that they should observe the rules which his wife had given them before they left. The girls ate at two o'clock, and although the meat that had been bought for them was called 'liver of the princes', it was also given to commoners: the name is purely honorific, and it is typical of Venda culture that every ceremonial or ritual action should have a title, just as types of *bepha* and musical styles are carefully distinguished. This classification of activity also helps people to remember the correct sequence of events. There were some who maintained that the four days of *bepha* should be regarded as the four legs of an ox, and that the fifth, on which the team leaves, is the tail; but I never found general substantiation of this concept.

From three to five o'clock, the girls danced on the level ground; then they did a

novelty dance, rather like the conga, in which each girl held on to the one in the front, and Tshidavhula led them round the dancing-ground, in amongst the spectators, and up to Moshavhanamadi's home, where they dismissed. The girls were very hoarse, and so my wife distributed cough mixture before they went off to collect firewood and have their supper. They danced in the evening, played *ngovholane* again, and also a game in which one of the girls rushed about disguised in maize-stalks as a monster from the bush, while they sang, *tsba mataka tshi a tonga-tonga* (the thing from the bush swaggers about). Some of the local boys and girls played *dxbombo* (or *tsbifase*), a young people's dance in which two groups stand opposite each other and, while they sing and clap, someone dances out to touch a person in the other group, who then dances back with him/her and touches another in the first group: the original dancer falls out until he/she is touched again, and so the game continues.

On the third day, the girls danced in Moshavhanamadi's council-place, as usual, from six to seven o'clock; they had light refreshments, washed their faces, and danced again until 9.15 a.m. Tshidavhula and some others left early for Sibasa with Vho-Nyadzannya, to collect pension money for elderly relatives. They danced in the afternoon from one to five o'clock, and had some more cough mixture for their voices, which were cracking under the strain of so much singing. Two of the Magidi girls quarrelled about their positions in the circle dance; it is unlikely that they would have done this if Tshidavhula had not been absent, because she, as leader, selects the dancing positions: strictly speaking, this is done on merit, but more generally it depends on the height and size of the girls. The party returned from Sibasa at seven o'clock, and there was singing, dancing and story-telling until half-past nine — but still no beer, alas!

On the fourth day, the normal routine was enhanced by the slaughter of the ox. The male officers of the team first made sure that there were no members of the Lemba clan present, since they would insist on slaughtering the animal themselves in Kosher fashion; and then they slaughtered and skinned the ox, and divided the meat in the traditional way. They completed the whole operation in less than an hour with two penknives and an axe. The Magidi people received an extra share of meat: the neck would have been given to the Tshivhambe girls, if they had troubled to organize a home team and dance. According to custom, the left hindleg was given to Moshavhanamadi, who provided the ox, and the right hindleg to Magidi, as *musumo*. One horn was kept by Moshavhanamadi, so that he could show visitors what a big animal he had killed for the team, and the other was sent to Magidi for the same purpose. At half-past nine we heard the first sound of ululations in the distance: women were coming from Magidi to bring their daughters and relatives food for the final day, to watch them dance and help them play the drums, and to return home in the afternoon with the shares of meat that would be given to each girl in addition to what was cooked for lunch.

It was a day of great excitement, only marred by one incident. There was a complaint that the visitors had been stealing oranges from Moshavhanamadi's trees; but fortunately it transpired that they had been stolen by people from Tshivhambe: it is quite common for this sort of thing to happen when there is a visiting team, because they are easily open to blame for any theft. Moshavhanamadi was most upset that any of his people should have even thought of accusing his visitors, and he apologised for the incident. The Magidi girls danced exceptionally well in the afternoon, and there was a large crowd watching them. A bangle-maker took this opportunity to sell his ware, and there were two other men selling sugar-cane to the audience. At four o'clock the girls were called to collect the extra meat, and they gave it to their 'mothers' from Sibasa, who then set off for home amidst universal rejoicing. At five o'clock, they broke off to collect firewood, and once again they spent the evening singing, dancing, and telling stories.

The girls danced, as usual, on the morning of the fifth day, but after breakfast they wore their special clothes and moved down to the plain to dance. By means of their novelty dance, they moved up into Moshavhanamadi's home, danced around the huts

and in front of the headman himself, said a formal farewell, and set off for Magidi at mid-day. On the way they stopped to dance and drink beer at Tshiluvhi, at the home of headman Magidi's sister. As they passed through Sibasa, they learnt that a *bepha* from Tshisikule, which also left on Saturday, had just returned home. They reached Magidi at 4.15 p.m., danced and greeted their headman, and knelt while Jameson reported on the expedition. Headman Magidi told the girls to rest, as he wanted to send them on another *bepha* within a few days. The girls left for their homes at five o'clock: all said that they had greatly enjoyed the expedition, and nobody complained about the disappointing lack of beer. The weeks passed, but no further *bepha* left Magidi in 1957.

Sequel: The girls prepare for *bepha* in 1958, but abandon the project

In the middle of February 1958, several girls of Magidi asked if they could dance *tshigombela*, but were told that they could not begin until the wedding was finished. The senior girls were not very keen on the idea, because they wanted to attend the *domba* initiation which was being held for Mphaphuli's people at Malamangwa. However, daily practices began on March 3. On March 5, Jameson spoke to them between two dances: "I can see that you senior girls, and especially the nobles (*vhakololo*), have not forgotten your steps, and that you are dancing very well indeed. But the trouble is that you are not yet dancing as a team: you must do your best to teach the little ones to dance nicely. When all of you are dancing together, then I will tell you about *bepha*."

In 1957, the Magidi girls had invited girls from Mbaleni to join their team, because they only had an acting headman. In 1958, the Mbaleni girls came to watch the dancing at Magidi, and complained that they had not been invited: "Why don't the Magidi girls ask us to join them? They are showing off too much this year, and if they go on being so full of themselves, we will ask to have our own team. Tshidavhula and her friend Tshidaho are particularly full of themselves; and they are just doing it to attract the boys". Some women at Magidi said that *tshigombela* was a waste of time and money, in any case: "Why do the girls go to all this trouble? What is meat, after all?" On the seventh day, Tshidavhula and two senior girls asked headman Magidi's permission to invite the girls from Mbaleni, and he agreed. They called their team together and took their drumstick (*tshiombo*) with them, in order to call the Mbaleni girls. In 1957 they forgot to take the drumstick, and so they pulled up a maize stalk (*tanga*) on the way, and played the *thungwa* drum with it. They danced twice at Mbaleni, and everyone was impressed by their performance. When they said that they had come to invite the Mbaleni girls to join them, one woman suggested that *tshigombela* should rather be held at Mbaleni, as it had been held at Magidi the previous year; but this suggestion was overruled. The Mbaleni girls then played the drums and the Magidi girls sang and danced again. It was getting dark, and so the Magidi girls stopped playing and left without even putting the drums away or saying good-bye. One old woman was cross and said, "What about our drums? You had better not leave them out again! Besides, we had some *mukumbi* beer made of marula fruit for you, and now that you have gone away without saying goodbye, we cannot give you any." This was the first time that beer had been mentioned!

On the next day, when the Mbaleni girls came along to dance, Tshidavhula showed off and annoyed everyone. She knew that they relied too much on her, and that when she was not there the alternative soloists were ineffectual. She arrived late, made rude remarks about the performance, took over the playing of the *thungwa* drum and confused the dancers by mixing the rhythms: "I am making mistakes on purpose", she said, "in order to teach you a lesson. You're not dancing properly". The Mbaleni girls and several Magidi girls were fed up and went home, but a few stayed on and performed under Tshidavhula's direction. At ensuing practices the girls from Mbaleni and the juniors from Magidi were much more enthusiastic than Tshidavhula and her contemporaries. The result was that the Mbaleni girls often found that they were the only

seniors present, and they resented the indifference of the senior Magidi girls. Who-Zhambuko, Magidi's first wife, said that one reason for the inadequate performances was that the younger girls were able to dance, but they could not *sing* well.

Even if they did sing well, the younger girls could not presume to take the initiative. On one occasion, two little girls wore their *thuzwu* leg rattles to the practice, but when they saw that no one else had them, they took them off. Three days later, a girl went behind a bush to change when she saw that she was the only one in full dancing costume; when some seniors arrived in costume, she changed back again. These are typical examples of the girls' dislike of being exceptional, and I encountered many similar incidents.

Eventually the Mbaleni girls said that they would not come, because they had to do all the work while Tshidavhula and her friends flirted with boys and played cards, or merely tapped the *murumba* drums in an idle fashion. Jameson told them to ignore this, and promised that he would soon give them *bepha*. On the twenty-ninth day, headman Magidi asked Tshidavhula why she was not dancing but playing cards: "If you girls don't want to dance *tshigombela*, then don't tear up my drums any more", he said. Who-Zhambuko added, "Why did you ask our permission to dance? you don't seem to want to dance any more". Nobody answered, but the little girls struck up a tune which never really got under way. On the following day, Tshidavhula and her friends played cards and there was no dancing. Then followed the Easter week-end, and after that they did not dance again: not even the appearance of a *bepha* from Dzingahe (see Plate VI) aroused their enthusiasm. Besides, three senior Magidi girls were married, and Tshidavhula went off for six days as a bridesmaid; and during the first week in May girls began going to the initiation schools of *tshikanda* and *domba*.

It was, I think, largely the marriage of some senior girls or their desire to go to initiation that caused *tshigombela* to flop. Furthermore, Tshidavhula and Muthundinne had been cornerstones of the 1957 team; and in 1958 Muthundinne was unavailable, because she was attending the first stage of her initiation and her husband was anxious for her to complete the cycle and marry him. Tshidavhula had no immediate prospects of marriage, but her life tended to revolve round her male admirers, and she enjoyed her popularity: she had been given too much responsibility in 1957, so that there was no one to take over in 1958. Besides, she was still available as a leader, and accepted as such, and if any younger person had tried to usurp her position she would have taken offence, even though she was no longer very interested in *tshigombela*. There were girls from Mbaleni who might have filled the gap created by the defection of the Magidi seniors, but they could not command as long as they were the guests of another district, and in any case they were thoroughly fed up with Tshidavhula and her friends and quite glad to be rid of the whole venture.

II. A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF *BEPHA LA MUKUMBULULO* in 1957

In May 1957, Chief Mphaphuli sent out a team of 67 girls to dance *tshigombela* at the headquarters of those of his senior headmen who lived within a radius of about five miles of his capital, Mbilwi, which is just outside Sibasa. The team for this "tax-tour" was recruited from the chief's village, and from the districts of three neighbouring petty headmen: there was thus a nucleus of well-fed, bumptious 'princesses' who danced with great panache. They had been practising since the beginning of March, and had had informal dance competitions with other district teams, whose members were mostly commoners.

Two senior women and three men were appointed to manage the team: one of the men, who was also well-known as a singer and master of *domba* initiation schools, worked in a Sibasa store, and so he could only officiate in the evenings and at weekends.

The team arrived at headman Mphephu's place on the evening of Monday, May 13,

1957, and danced there for two days, occasionally relieved by the Lufule district team. On the afternoon of the first day, the performance of the chief's team was poor, and people said it was because the two girls in charge were drunk and thrashed team-members even if they sang well: as the saying goes, *mukoma a tudza, vbalanda vba a tudza-vho*, 'if the headman limps, his followers do the same'. On the second day, a very large beast was slaughtered for them, but they managed to eat all the meat. As *musumo* to the sender of the team, headman Mphephu sent not the customary hindleg, but a whole beast to chief Mphaphuli. (The word *musumo* is derived from *-suma* - to inform a superior of an event, so that it refers to anything that is reported back, either in word or in kind.)

During their stay at Lufule, one of the neighbouring headmen brought thirty shillings to the manager of the chief's team, and asked him not to visit his home, as he had no oxen. The manager did not agree to this, as he had been given orders by the chief to visit that headman, and he advised him not to be absent when they came, as the chief might then appoint another headman.

The chief's team moved to headman Ne-Mavhunda's on the morning of Thursday, May 16, and on Friday a beast was slaughtered for them, and another was sent to the chief. As the slaughtered animal was big and the girls had recently eaten their fill at Lufule, they sent some meat to their mothers.

They moved to Tshivhulani on the Saturday morning. The team-manager who worked in Sibasa arrived early in the afternoon, took the stick of office from his deputy, and supervised the dancing. After the dance, he called the team together and reported that some young schoolboys had told their mothers about the senior girls thrashing the dancers on the previous Tuesday, and the mothers had reported the matter to the chief. The chief said that if there were any team-members who considered they had been unjustly treated, they should come and see him. The boys also reported that the princesses (*vbakololo*) were scoffing all the beer and most of the meat. The manager's comment on this drew laughter from all: he said, "Tonight, the princesses will make the commoners sleep in the bush. And if any more schoolboys from Mbilwi come and watch our team, I shall punish them". They did not dance on the following morning, because it rained; and in the afternoon they danced in their salem pores, because the ground was muddy and they did not want to spoil their special dancing clothes. After an hour, their manager told them to dress up, as their mothers were coming and they should look smart. The headman at Tshivhulani had some difficulty in finding two oxen, and so the team had to stay an extra day. On the Monday morning, therefore, one ox was sent to the chief as *musumo* and another was slaughtered: this was big, but thin, and so there was no meat for the mothers.

On Monday afternoon, they moved to Tshifure, and on the Tuesday afternoon a large crowd gathered to see them perform a dramatization of the poison ordeal, which they call *muswuru*. This game is one of the diversions of *tshigombela* expeditions, but it is not one that they like to play often, as even a game about witchcraft might invite trouble. In general, commoners tend to leave the performance to 'princesses', whose senior rank is thought to give them better protection.

DRAMATIZATION OF THE POISON ORDEAL

The Chief (Kbosi) sits on a chair, wearing an overcoat and a trilby hat, with a handkerchief shading the top of his face and a lighted paraffin lamp at his feet. His aide (*mukoma*) holds an umbrella over his head, and, on his left, kneel his three young wives. Next to the chief, and dressed in the married woman's cloth skirt (*musisi*), is the one called *muselwa* (young wife). Next to her, and naked except for a small cloth and a *thabu* behind, is the most junior wife (*mutanuni*), who is called *tshixele*, because she is nursing a child, represented by a swaddled cloth. The third wife, who sits on the far side of the group and is dressed like the first, is called *mudzadze*, because she has just been confined, and it is her child whom the junior wife is nursing: in front of her is a *mufaro* basket with the lid on, containing a gourd of water, which serves both for the poison for the ordeal (*muswuru*) and the cure (*mushonga*). There are four other characters in the drama: there are *two women*, dressed normally in salem pores, and *two mad persons* (*mipengo*)

who have been to the diviner (*mungome*). One of these is called *the old woman* (*mukegulu*); she wears a goat-skin skirt and a grass necklace, and hobbles along with a stick of river-reed (*lutanga*), and her head is smeared with ash. The other has turned up her upper lip and tied it back with a strip of rattan, her face is covered with soot, and she carries a small axe.

As the actors walk in to take up their positions, the rest of the team and the audience repeat continuously, the song:

Abee, abee, vba muswuru vba vbuya lini?

Ah, when are they coming back from the poison ordeal?

When they have settled down, the two lunatics run crazily in and out of the circle of audience and girls, and the two women come forward to drink the "poison" in the calabash. As soon as they have drunk, they stand up and begin to run around wildly, holding their hands to their ears and shaking them, which proves that they are witches (*vbalo*). They join the two lunatics, sometimes they chase each other, and sometimes they even dance with the rest of the team, who now sing the song:

Solo: *Vba muswuruni vbo vbuyana?*

Have they come back from the poison ordeal?

Chorus: *Yowee, vba bva mungomeni, vba vbuya vbo farwa*

Alas! They went to the diviner, and when they came back they were seized (proved guilty).

The chief gives them permission to go again to the diviner. The young wife takes a doctor's cow-tail switch and sprinkles the lunatics with the "medicine" from the calabash. They are thus cured, whilst the two women who are kneeling down beside them, shake violently.

This concludes the game, and the chief and his wives walk off to the accompaniment of ululation, followed by four girls dancing solos (*u gaya*).

I was told of a different version of the drama which had been performed by the Mbilwi team in 1954. There were four witches who were made to drink the poison, which made them mad: the chief was afraid that they would kill his child, and so he shot them. In another version, the part of *mudzadzze*, (wife recently confined), was referred to as *mulwadze*, (a sick person). From this, and other, information, it is clear that there are many variations of the basic drama.

On Wednesday, May 22, the headman sent one beast to the chief and killed for the girls what their manager described as "a blind calf, with horns as big as my first finger", so that again there was no meat for the girls' mothers.

The team moved on to headman Tshimange's, which is close to the chief's capital, on Thursday; and on Friday afternoon, at four o'clock, after a long dancing session, a thin old cow was killed for them — "so weak that it was happy to die without a fight". On the following day they danced, and at four o'clock they performed once more the drama of the poison ordeal. After some more dancing, they went on to report to their chief at Mbilwi, who told them that they should be prepared to go on a four-day expedition to Lambani within a few days: he then dismissed them to their respective homes, as it was nearly dusk.

The expedition to Lambani never materialized. But during the school holidays, when boys were available, the chief sent a *tsbikona* team to visit the headmen who ruled the more distant areas in the east of his country. This 'tax-gathering' expedition spent only one day at each headman's place, and collected in each case one beast to be driven to the chief's capital, and another to be slaughtered for themselves. From Thursday, June 27 to Friday, July 12, 1957, they visited sixteen headmen. The last of these men was subject to another chief, and the team visited him to congratulate him on his recent accession: only one animal was killed, therefore, and the chief received its hindleg as *musumo*. Some of the distances covered during this tour were considerable, and it could not have been accomplished in so short a time had it not been possible for the team to travel occasionally by bus, or on the lorry of one of the chief's friends. The same team was sent out again during the following week to five other headmen who lived nearer the chief's capital.

III. BEPHA FROM JOHANNESBURG TO THENGWE

Friday, April 19—Monday, April 22, 1957

In March 1957, a group of Venda living in the Selby Municipal Compound, Johannesburg, held a meeting and decided to take a *tsbikona* team to chief Ne-Thengwe at Easter. Their manager told them that the cost of the journey would be £2 15s. each and that

they would join forces with a group from City Deep Mine. They wrote a letter to the chief to see if he would be willing to receive them. The Selby team normally plays *tsbikona* on Sundays in Johannesburg; the manager and his assistants collect money, buy beer at the Mai Mai Beer hall, and return with it to Selby Compound. If there is no beer available, they do not play for very long, as blowing *tsbikona* is thirsty work.

At 7.20 a.m. on April 19, the first bus of *tsbikona* players from Johannesburg arrived in Sibasa, the administrative 'capital' of Vendaland, and within a few minutes the visiting team was dancing outside the Magistrate's office. The Venda call *tsbikona* music *lwa-ba-masia-kebali-i-tshi-vhila*, 'the time when people rush off and leave their pots to boil over'; and indeed boys were racing, and women and girls were cantering along to the scene. A second team arrived soon afterwards and performed while the others rested and greeted friends and relatives. The unusual costumes of the visiting teams, sometimes with praise-names embroidered on the back, and the distinctive flags and emblems which they carried, excited the interest and admiration of their rural audience.

More buses either passed through Sibasa or stopped to play on their way to different areas. At last the Selby team arrived in a large red bus, and played for about half-an-hour, leaving Sibasa at 11.20 a.m. They did not reach Thengwe until 4 p.m., because they stopped several times on the way to meet the friends and relatives who were waiting by the roadside, and to drink the beer which was either sold or given to them.

At Thengwe, all was ready for the visitors. A large audience was gathering; boys from the chief's village had brought down a set of reed pipes and drums to the open space at the foot of the village which is used as a school playground, and a man with a donkey-cart had parked himself under the shade of a tree, where he could sell refreshments to the spectators and dancers — oranges for a penny each, sweet potatoes at threepence for a large one or for a bundle of small ones, and sugar-cane for fourpence or sixpence, depending on size.

An amiable drunkard came staggering up to talk to the vendor; then he passed on to greet two friends, slipped on the side of the track and fell in the dust, picked himself up, shook hands as he had intended, and walked on up to the chief's village, singing merrily. Later, when *tsbikona* was being played, he had a splendid time dancing in and out amongst performers and audience, waving a stick with great vigour, pirouetting, leaping and occasionally crashing into a spectator, causing much amusement, but no annoyance, with his antics.

Shortly after the Selby team reached Thengwe, another local team arrived from Shakadza, a district whose headman is subordinate to, and related to, chief Ne-Thengwe. The players from town were most surprised to find three girls playing reed-pipes with the Shakadza team, since girls are not supposed to dance *tsbikona*: it seems that the Shakadza people make an exception to this rule, though some spectators suggested that it was merely a technique for encouraging more youths to join the team. The Shakadza team had some novel dance-steps and one of their number was an excellent clown, so that the audience was very appreciative.

After this dance, the home team from the chief's village came into the arena. A chief's team is traditionally called *thondo*, because it is supposed to be recruited from the members of *thondo*, an enclosure at a chief's village with a hut in the middle, which provides a meeting place for those who have been initiated (see van Warmelo 1932, pp. 109-124, and Stayt 1931, pp. 101-105). Its members were mostly youths and boys, but they danced some good steps, and added to *tsbikona* the novelty of sitting down and singing *Hogo*, the ritual song of the boys' circumcision school, *murundu*, which is not really a traditional Venda institution. Another novelty which aroused comment, was the dancing of two boys with leg-rattles.

The Shakadza team danced again, with three new steps; and then amidst great excitement and trilling from the women, the Johannesburg team came out to dance. In contrast with the other teams, whose drummers were women, these men played their own

drums, made in town from petrol and oil drums. Two old ladies went inside the circle of players to dance in the stately fashion of old or important persons (*u tanga*), and they were accompanied by a man who held a feather mop over them (see Plate VII).

The Johannesburg team then moved up to the chief's village, to introduce themselves and pay him a formal gift (*ndwbo*) of £5 10s. They danced in the chief's meeting-place, and then returned to the clearing at the foot of the village.

The chief suggested that all the teams should dance together, and he led the dance himself. The excitement of the audience and the sound of the music were overwhelming.

After this the teams performed separately until sundown, and dispersed. The visitors stayed in the chief's village or with friends and relatives, and beer-drinking and sporadic singing continued until late at night.

By about 8.30 on the following morning an ox had been killed and skinned, the visitors were drinking beer with men from the chief's village, and the ox was being roasted.

Beasts which are ceremonially killed generally have a title, and this was called "the liver of the visitors" — the liver being the most desired part, which is usually given to the chief.

At 11.35 a.m., the Johannesburg team collected their reed-pipes, the majority of which were not made with the traditional *musumunu* reed, but with an assortment of pieces of brass curtain-rods, pram handles, hose-piping, and other materials. After a warning of three blasts on a small whistle (*tshinangana*) had been given three times, they danced for ten minutes, rested for sixteen minutes, danced for twelve minutes, and then drank some beer.

In the afternoon, teams from Tshandama and Maheni joined those from Johannesburg, the chief's *thondo*, and Shakadza, and there was keen comment by the audience on their respective merits. The teams spent the night in the chief's village, but did not dance after dark because they were tired.

On the following morning, the Shakadza team was the first to dance: most people agreed that it was the best, and the chief and his councillors shared this view. Shortly afterwards another team arrived from Lukau, and the chief again led the dance; this team could not stay long, because there were many small boys who had to return home and look after their families' herds.

Another beast was killed for the Johannesburg team, and this was called "the meat of the visitors". Because it was generally agreed that the Shakadza team had surpassed the others, they were rewarded with a foreleg. The preparation of meat and porridge took some time, and the visitors did not dance much more that day. Furthermore, many were rather drunk, so that the standard of dancing deteriorated considerably, and others were away visiting relatives.

The man who had devised the dance-steps of the Johannesburg team and had trained them, was not present: he had left his stick and reed-pipe in the bus and gone off to spend the week-end with his wife, whom he had seen briefly at Makumbane, on the way to Sibasa. Chief Ne-Thengwe was disappointed with the manager of the Johannesburg team, because he neither drank beer, nor ate the meat of cows, goats, sheep or pigs. He would only eat fowls, because he had had some special treatment from a doctor in his youth.

There was even less dancing on Easter Monday, and in the afternoon the visitors prepared for their journey home: they took with them the skins of the two beasts for covering their drums. They danced for a while, and were then given a large pot of beer.

At 3 p.m. the manager instructed his team to pay homage and say farewell to the chief, who said that he hoped they would come again. Relatives of the visitors were there to see them off with sugar-cane, nuts and mealie-cobs for the journey. On the way back to Sibasa they stopped for ten minutes so that they could drink some beer prepared by an old woman whose son was in the team. They drove off with her calabash, but her son

shouted back that she need not worry about the loss, as he would make good use of it in Johannesburg.

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NOTE:—It has not been possible, with the available print, to distinguish the ordinary from the dental *d*, *l*, *n* and *t* in Venda words.