

VENDA CHILDREN'S SONGS, by JOHN BLACKING. Witwatersrand University Press. 1967. Price: R5.50. 210 pages.

The book presents a minutely accurate description of 56 "Nyimbo dza Vhana" — children's songs collected by the author during his extensive field research in Vendaland. The songs are analysed from every conceivable point of view — the meaning, origin, function of the words, how they are learned, the occasions when they are sung, their social importance, their relationship with other types of Venda music, their melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures, the relation of pitch to speech-tone, etc. Towards the end the analysis reaches a high level of sophistication in the "Cultural Analysis", which is introduced as a new method of musical analysis, by means of relating musical structure to its cultural background.

The words of the songs, whose description occupies most of the book, have that fascinating simplicity, originality, and illogicality of children's songs and games anywhere. They have the virtue of being relatively easily understood, and, set in place, as Blacking does intimately, by following up a clue contained in a word or phrase to explain a part of the whole Venda picture, they build a very attractive picture of children's life in Vendaland, and make fascinating reading. For me this is the best part of the book . . . such vignettes as:

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| <p>37. "Hi there, Matodzil<br/>Come over here!<br/>So that I can tell you<br/>My news,<br/>Which I was told<br/>By my mother<br/>And my grandmother.<br/>What did you have for supper yesterday evening?<br/>Porridge.<br/>What did you eat with it?<br/>Meat.<br/>Why don't you cut off a piece for me?<br/>Because there was only very little meat."<br/>With whom will you play tomorrow?<br/>With a pot.<br/>What kind of pot?<br/>A soft pot.<br/>How soft?<br/>Soft and supple.<br/>How supple?<br/>As supple as cattle.<br/>What kind of cattle?<br/>Black cattle."<br/>Etc.</p> | <p>43. "Here the rain comes, pouring down.<br/>Carry me on your back, aunty;<br/>Let me shelter in the verandah.<br/>Big houses are warm."</p> <p>45. "Who is that?<br/>It's Vho-Muragweni.<br/>What's he doing there?<br/>He's skinning his ox.<br/>Come, let us squat down there!<br/>I've got a nasty sore.<br/>Come let me prick it!<br/>I am afraid of death.<br/>Death is nothing.<br/>Where are our ancestors?<br/>Our ancestors are under the ground.<br/>Let's dig down and see.<br/>There's nothing but bones.<br/>Alas! The gourd (is broken)."</p> |
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The extremely thorough musical analysis follows the standard ethnomusicological practice of counting metrical patterns, range, intervals in melody and harmony and so on. Unaccustomed as I am to reading more than one four-syllable word per square inch, I find this part heavily overwritten, particularly in view of the simplicity of the songs themselves. However, some interesting things come out of it. The first is that the melodies of many Venda songs, both children's and adults', are based on the *Tshikona* reed-pipe dance, the national dance of the Venda. This dance has apparently only one melodic/harmonic pattern, unlike other reed-pipe dances in southern Africa of which I am aware. Briefly, this consists of two parallel-moving, descending scales. By comparing song melodies with the *tshikona* pattern we can see immediately if they fit, and 26 of these children's songs do!

*Tshikona* is thus shown to be a major part of Venda musical life, from the way in which its pattern permeates so much else of the musical culture. Other types of songs, e.g. beer songs, which are also based on the *tshikona* pattern, are also mentioned.

Another 21 songs are based on certain regular "harmonic" sequences in a pentatonic scale, and these are shown to be very similar to those preferred in the boys' pentatonic reed-pipe dances.

A question which has often puzzled me is why some Africans, when singing in dotted crotchet time, clap on an apparent "up-beat" rather than on the expected, vocally stressed, down-beat. An interesting solution is proposed here in the case of these Venda children's songs, where this happens frequently:

"In Venda music the first and last syllables of word-patterns generally coincide with the first and last beats of the metrical patterns . . ." It seems that the last beat, particularly, should coincide. Thus the clapping pattern is made to fit the word pattern, wherever that may make the claps fall, on the 1st, 2nd or 3rd quaver of each dotted crotchet. In many cases this turns out to be on the 3rd quaver.

To judge from this example, further instalments of Blacking's detailed observation of Venda music will be keenly looked forward to. I, for one, hope that he will try to present it in terms a little less top-heavy.

Andrew Tracey.