

## A HOBBYIST LOOKS AT ZULU AND XHOSA SONGS

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In 1937 I spent a year teaching in Kilnerton Native Training Institute outside Pretoria. Delighted by the singing I heard there, I started my hobby of collecting Bantu songs. In 1944 I became an inspector of schools with the whole of the Cape Province as my field of work. This enabled me to drop in at native schools in search of songs. Most of the songs in my collection were acquired in this way.

My interest in Bantu songs was that of the singer. I wanted Bantu songs to sing and to teach others to sing. I have not developed the ethnologist's interest in Bantu songs. I have, in other words, not concerned myself with the folklore aspect of Bantu songs. It was development from the primitive to Bantu songs of today that intrigued me.

Riding this hobby horse, I have, for myself, made three very interesting discoveries. The first is that the language of the Southern Bantu, particularly Xhosa which I have studied, is a wonderful language of song. I have come to regard it as second to none in this respect. I shall return to this point presently.

My second discovery was the range of Bantu songs from the point of view of development, or should I say, levels of development. My third discovery follows on because it concerns the host of Bantu song-writers in the Eastern Cape, particularly. I was amazed to find so many educated Xhosas and Zulus, trying their hand at song writing.

To return to Xhosa as a language of song, I wish to point out the following:—

1. Its richness in vowels and particularly the sweeter vowels, *u* and *i*, that are the singer's delight on this count alone Xhosa surpasses Italian which is lauded as a language of song.

2. Its greater variety of consonants: here one need mention only the clicks, *c*, *q*, and *x*, and laterals like *dl* and *bl* that are so foreign to the European tongue.

3. Its syllabic—*m* yielding a hum which is part and parcel of the language in which the ama-Xhosa have to sing.

4. Its alliterative concord yielding again a play of sounds the writer of Xhosa or Zulu songs has ready-made in his language. The following is an excellent example.

“Izinduna zami ezinkulu ezifikile zisemfuleni.”

5. Its flair for idiophones, for the onomatopoeic word, for instance, “chapha chapha” (falling of raindrops), “Zwiii” (swaying, swinging movement), “gwa” (The bang of a blow with a stick or kierie), “pho” (a knock-out blow).

In classifying my collection of Bantu songs I have used the following scheme:—

- A. Genuine folk songs—traditional.
- B. Songs sung as folk songs but obviously of recent origin and revealing a greater or lesser degree of Western influence.

- C. Songs made to order:—

1. sacred songs, (2) school songs and (3) songs by Bantu songwriters.

The use of this classification compelled me to formulate the characteristic of a genuine Bantu folk song, that is, a song that has come down to the Bantu from his distant past when his singing was free from Western influence. I have formulated six of these characteristics.

- i These songs always use a primitive scale. It is mostly the pentatonic scale, but I

have found songs in a scale even more primitive than the pentatonic for instance; in tonic solfa, d, m, s, l, d'.

- ii These songs always use a very simple rhythm suggestive of an accompaniment by straightforward clapping of hands or stamping of feet or the simplest form of quick pace drumming.
- iii These songs always reveal a childlike delight in repetition. At best they are two or three snatches of melody sung by different voices over and over again with interjections to break the monotony.
- iv These songs are generally characterised by the interjections just mentioned. They suggest a singer or group of singers with an audience trying to get in on the song even if it is only by shouting or by making some sound by way of interjection.
- v These songs are characterised by the absence of the Western idea of harmony in singing. There is, for instance, no teaming up of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. I have not yet found a Bantu folk song in which two voices sing the same musical phrase and words in harmony as we so often do in Western harmonised singing, for instance, an alto voice following a soprano voice two notes lower on the scale. It is characteristic of the genuine Bantu folksong that it comprises two or more snatches of melody sung by different sections of the group of singers (sometimes almost independently) in such a way that the voices do not clash.
- vi When these songs are sung there is almost invariably a song-leader who sets the ball rolling and keeps the song going.

Among the printed songs I can point out the Makweta-song "Somagwaza" in "African Folk Songs" by H. C. N. Williams and J. N. Maslewa (Lovedale Press) as a prototype.

There are two recordings that are good examples of genuine Zulu and Xhosa folk songs. They are:—

1. Wayengathini: (Columbia YE 59) and (2) Satana (H.M.V. JP 186).

"Wayengathini" is sung in grand western style with an operatic finale. It retains, however, the spirit of the Zulu folksong with all the characteristics mentioned above.

There are a great number of songs that the Zulus and Xhosas sing as traditional which are obviously of very recent origin. These songs reveal a greater or lesser extent of Western influence while they retain some, if not all, of the characteristics of a genuine Bantu folksong. Among these songs are little gems that will steal the heart of anyone who loves singing. Here are two examples:—

Hamba - nini Hamba - nini si-ye - ema - ka - ya  
When are we going, when do we go home?  
Ham ba - ni - ni

La - la La-la m-twana 'yo - ngo' yonteng' amabele wadhla bis  
Sleep, sleep, little one, I'll buy you corn to eat with milk  
umtwan' wadhla ibis'

In this class there is a very fine recording of a "traditional" that is obviously modern. It is "Lusapho Lwe-Afrika", (Colombia YE 113). Sung beautifully by the African Zulu Male Voice Choir in full Western harmony, this song has virtually only the Zulu's flair for interjection in common with the genuine folksong.

I have put Bantu school songs in a class of their own. They are book-songs generally not sung by "the people". They owe their origin to the teacher's need to find songs for her singing lessons. Naturally these teachers followed the line of least resistance and made songs for their singing lessons by translating English or Afrikaans songs. It was, however, only to be expected that somewhere at some time this host of teachers responsible for singing lessons would produce a bright spark, a gifted teacher who could create a new and a distinctively Bantu song.

There are two interesting booklets of such songs for Xhosa children. They are: (1) A Junior Song Book for Native Schools: compiled by Constance Beal: Lovedale Press. (2) Shawbury Jubilee Collection of Unison Songs and Singing Games: compiled by the staff and students of the Shawbury Training School: Lovedale Press. The former contains both English and Bantu songs. The latter contains only songs in Xhosa.

Although these school songs are a far cry from the genuine Bantu folksong they include some rare gems. In Constance Beal's booklet there is such a delightful song as "Xhosa Lullaby". In the Shawbury booklet there is such a quaint little song as "Imvula" (the shower) which plays cleverly upon Bantu clicks and onomatopoeic words.

I - mvu - la, I - mvu - la chapha, chapha, chapha, Imanz'! lokhwe yam  
The rain, the rain, drip, drip, drip. My dress is wet.

Gqum! Gqum! Ku - ya - du - du - ma. I - manz'! lokhwe yam I - manz'! lokhwe yam  
Boom! Boom! It is thundering. My dress is wet, my dress is wet.

Finally there is a great number of songs by Zulu or Xhosa songwriters whose names are known to us. Among these songwriters there is an older generation and a new generation. The older generation were all missionaries and quite naturally they seem to have written nothing but sacred songs. From the point of view of the development of African music this older generation of songwriters may have no significance or they may have significance only in the negative sense of exemplifying the stranglehold church music gained on the minds of the educated Bantu. Culturally, however, the work of these older songwriters is very interesting. It is, for instance a very interesting fact that old Ntsikana, a Xhosa missionary of the 19th century, has become immortal among his people through the Bell Song he used to sing to call his congregation to his church services. In the Eastern Province it is hard to find an educated Bantu who does not know the name of Ntsikana.

Another and perhaps the finest example of the heritage of this older generation of Bantu songwriters of the South is the fact that the song the Bantu people throughout Southern Africa have spontaneously accepted as their national anthem was written by one of these missionary-songwriters. Enoch Sontonga's "Nkosi Sikelela i Afrika" (God bless Africa) is typical of the songs written by the older generation. If I am not mistaken, it was the first song by a Bantu to be published in staff notation as a complete piece of music. All the other published songs I have in my collection are in tonic solfa.

Another name one likes to mention here is that of John Knox Bokwe of whom a biography has been written in Xhosa. This grand old man of the world of Bantu songs

has to his credit (correct me somebody!) that he was the first Bantu to publish a book of songs. It is called "Amaculo ase Lovedale" and published by the Lovedale Press.

The students of the University of Stellenbosch recently honoured John Knox Bokwe by featuring his fine song, "Vuka Deborah", at their annual Festival of Song.

The work of the more serious-minded section of the new generation of Bantu songwriters is characterised by an attempt—generally not very successful attempt—to break away from the sacred song. A hangover of the hallelujah-style of singing encouraged by the older generation of Bantu songwriters can still be discerned in many of the secular songs of these present-day songwriters.

If we have to name some of these songwriters alphabetically, we must begin with Dr. R. T. Caluza of whom several songs have been printed in tonic solfa by the Lovedale Press. None of his songs seems to have become a hit.

Majola appears to be well-known as a songwriter in the Eastern Cape. Of his work I have only one unpublished song, but it is among the best in my collection. It is a four part song called "Umlambo" (the river) and it is an attempt to express in music and song the exuberance of bird life on the riverbank.

M. M. J. Masiza, of whom the Oxford University Press have published a few songs in tonic solfa, comes next. A fine rendering of his song "Vukani ma-wethu" by none less than the Kilnerton Institute Choir, can be heard on a H.M.V. record (J.P. 112). On the other side of this record the same choir sings "Hamba Kahle" by T. T. Matshikiza, a song worth hearing as typical of the efforts of the serious-minded present-day Bantu songwriters who are trying hard (perhaps too hard) to shake off the hold Western church music has on them.

Lastly I must mention another grand old man of the world of Bantu songs. He is the very well-known B. Tyamzashe, A.T.S.C., of Cala. His unpublished school songs and V Day celebration songs are among the most highly prized items in my collection. The Lovedale Press has also published a booklet of his songs entitled "Five S.S.C. part songs for Native Schools."

My only acquaintance with the more serious-minded Zulu song-writers of today is John Mseleku. He has published a booklet of Zulu songs in tonic solfa. This booklet contains one of the most delightful songs in this class. It is called "Isicwicwicwi" (the fascinating things of the city) It has on more than one occasion been sung by student choirs at the University of Stellenbosch.

To get a complete picture of the development of Bantu song in our time, I have also sought an acquaintance with the less serious-minded Bantu "maker of songs", that is, the jazz-minded Bantu. Here I have found two sections. Those who are completely at the mercy of the influence of American boogie-woogie-jazz, and those, the less prolific, who are building up jazz songs out of the African's own music.

The reader may gain an impression of what is happening here by listening to records such as:—(1) Vula Indlela: (Columbia YE 63)—as an example of Bantu red-hot American jazz. (2) Nomasithela: (H.M.V. JP 191)—as an example of the influence of the American crooner. (3) Ngiyeke Ndedwa: (Trutone XU 256a)—to get the other side of the story, namely, a jazz song retaining something of the Bantu's own musical heritage. On this record Absolom Indoda's guitar accompaniment does remind one of music one has heard on the Mbira and Timbile, the primitive xylophone-like musical instrument of the African people.

A by-product in collecting Bantu songs is a collection of opinions. Here are two conflicting opinions I have found. The first is from Hayden Matthews who writes "The music of the African usually consists of short phrases, scarcely more than two bars in length, which are repeated over and over, again and again without any alteration whatsoever in an endless unvaried tone, often accompanied by the stamping of feet or the clapping of hands or the beating of a primitive drum.

To the writer, what there is of African traditional music is of very little value, as it corresponds with the very first steps of European musical evolution, when music was little more than a wail and a howl."

The second opinion is from Hugh Tracey, who writes: "African music is far from dead. With careful guidance and a real understanding of their own genius, their musicians may yet have the opportunity of bringing to light one of the last untouched folk musics of the world, a music which should have wide significance beyond their borders, and grow into an established culture as easily recognised, for example, as the Hungarian, Hebridean, Georgian or South American musics."

My experience as a collector of Bantu songs has led me to agree with Hugh Tracey most heartily.

