

VENDA NOTE-NAMES

by

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The Venda tribe, who live in the Northern Transvaal on the middle Limpopo River, mostly on the south bank in the region north of Louis Trichardt, are noted for their Reed-flute *ensembles*. Professor Kirby has given us a detailed description of them¹. The *ensemble* consists of a set of from nineteen to twenty-six stopped bamboo pipes: they are end-blown, and as each produces only one note, a separate player is needed for every pipe. The pipes are each tuned to a different pitch and together yield a heptatonic scale covering from about two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half octaves, according to the number of pipes in the set.

This flute *ensemble* is used not only in the *Matangwa* dance but also — and it is important to note this — in the *Tshikona*, which is the national dance of the Venda.

The Venda are also xylophone players and probably have been for a long time. Kirby² quotes Dos Santos' description, written in 1586, of a xylophone of the type made now by the Venda. These xylophones were until recently of a large size, often with fairly elaborate carving on their wooden keys, and are much more impressive than the better known Chopi instruments. They have twenty-one or twenty-two notes tuned to a heptatonic scale.

The Venda have names for each note of their Reed-flute *ensemble*, but both Kirby

REED-FLUTE NAMES

	Stayt	Stayt	Kirby
	Tshikona	Matangwa	
Top:	1.		Matilo
	2.		Tezani(?)
	3.		Takulambidzi(?)
	4.		Mbidzi(?)
	5.		Tshiarabi(?)
	6.		Mbidze
	7.		Takulana
	8.	PHALANA	PALANA
	9.	Mpinji	Mpinji
	10.	Takulanu	Tshibobo
	11.	Tshikingugu	Tshihunguvu
	12.	Veve	Veve
	13.	Tshiarabi	Tshiarabi
	14.	Takhuli	Takula
	15.	PALA	PALA
	16.	Tangu	Tangwe
	17.	Mboho	Kolomo
	18.		Vevera
	19.		Zika (<i>lower notes</i>)
	20.		„ <i>all called</i>
Bottom:	21.		„ <i>Zika</i>

¹ P. R. Kirby: *The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa*, 2nd Edn., 1953, p. 156 ff.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

and Dr. E. O. Westphal point out that the xylophones have no separate vocabulary of note-names: the names of the flute notes are used for the xylophone keys.

Our concern in this essay is to find what conclusions may be drawn from a study of this double use of these names.

Let us start with the flutes. Investigators have found difficulty in determining these names not only because the lists given by the band-leaders contain different words, but in addition, where the names are identical, they do not always occur in the same order from high to low. We give below three such lists: Stayt³ has one list for the *Tshikona* set and another for the *Matangwa*. Professor Kirby's list is the result of collating variants supplied to him by band-leaders with that of the official flute-maker of Venda-land.

Two questions arise from these lists. In the first place, why do they vary? In a matter so important as the national dance of the tribe one would expect a highly conservative precision in the details of vocabulary. Further, as Kirby shows⁴, the making of the flute is a most serious business and even the gathering of the reeds is preceded by ritual and a propitiatory libation to the spirits. Why, then, this uncertainty as to the names of the notes?

Dr. E. O. Westphal, who has known the Venda most of his life, tells us that all these note-names are Venda words — that is, they are built in the form that Venda words take — and yet most of them, to a Venda speaker, are more or less meaningless. While the words suggest a possible meaning to him, he says that this is only what he feels they seem to mean and that his meanings would probably lead to considerable argument among the Venda themselves, as indeed has been the case when he has argued with them.

Thus he suggests:—

<i>Mutwilo</i>	may mean	(?)	sequence
<i>Phalana</i>			Young of <i>Phala</i> (<i>i.e.</i> small <i>Phala</i>)
<i>Phala (Pala)</i>	„ „	(?)	the scatterer, or big, important, dominant
<i>Mpinzhe</i>	„ „	(?)	the sharpener
<i>Veve</i>	„ „	(?)	onomatopoeia imitating sound of this flute
<i>Ndzhinge</i>	„ „	(?)	onomatopoeia for "high noise"
<i>Tshiaravbi</i>	„ „	(?)	the answerer
<i>Thakule</i>	„ „	(?)	the disentangler (if pronounced with low tones)
		(?)	the lifter (two high tones)
<i>Dangwe</i>	„ „	(?)	the leader
<i>Dzika (Zika)</i>	„ „	(?)	the calmer, sinker, settler

It is important to emphasize that these meanings are no more than hunches based on a deep knowledge of the language and that the words themselves would not immediately mean something definite in the mind of a Venda man.

Here, then, is a remarkable situation: the national flutes made and tuned with such care have virtually meaningless names. Is it possible there is some past history buried here? May it be that these names are an almost forgotten survival of a set of terms which at one time belonged to the notes but have never been properly understood by the Venda? Is it possible that the original names were not Venda words at all, but were taken over from outside by the Venda, and in the process became assimilated to Venda words or syllables of similar sound? We observe in this connection that Note 17 in Kirby's list is *Kolomo*: now this does have a ♀ finite meaning, which is "cow"; but in Stayt's list this note becomes *Mbobho* which means "bull". Is it possible that the original name of this note was a foreign word which sounded something like "*kolomo*", was assimilated under this name and later, by association of meaning, became "bull"? We do not seek to press the point beyond remarking that such a history would at least provide a rational explanation of what otherwise seems a rather extraordinary situation.

³ H. A. Stayt: *The Ba-Venda*, 1931, p. 321.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 161.

Turning now to the second question, on scanning the lists we notice that whatever else they disagree on, they all agree on the position of *PHALA* (pronounced as *PALA*) and its octave *PHALANA*. Our question, then, is this — Why are they so certain of *Phala*? In a complete list *Phala* is the fifteenth note down from the top, and its octave, *Pbalana*, is the eighth note down. Now Kirby⁵ says that each Reed-flute set is tuned at approximately the same pitches. The fifteenth note down from the top would therefore in each set have about the same vibration frequency. Further, not only does Professor Kirby state definitely, “The principal flute is that numbered 15”⁶, but Dr. Westphal tells us that to the Venda, *Phala* is just as fixed a note in their minds as “middle-C” is to us. Thus from the internal evidence of the flute names themselves, as well as from the comments of the investigators, we conclude that the note *Phala* is the key-note of the whole system, the “big, important or dominant” note in Westphal’s suggested translation.

We can take one more step, and assess the approximate pitch and frequency of this Venda flute key-note. Professor Kirby, having examined three hundred and six flutes, gives us the approximate pitches he considers are aimed at.⁷ Note 15, which is *Phala*, is pitched around B \flat below middle-C, that is, its frequency is around 230 vibrations per second.

Summing up the matter as far as the reed flutes are concerned, we see that they are built on a heptatonic scale whose principal note, *Phala*, has a frequency of about 230 V.p.s.; the uncertainties connected with the other note-names give added prominence to the centrality of *Phala*, and in addition suggest at least the possibility that they are not indigenous.

We now consider the Venda xylophones. Let us compare a list of xylophone note-names kindly supplied to us by John Blacking, and an incomplete list mentioned — *en passant* — in a discussion by some Venda musicians, with Professor Kirby’s list already quoted, which he says applies both to reed flutes and to xylophones:

XYLOPHONE NOTE-NAMES

	Kirby	Westphal	Blacking
Top:			
1.	Matilo	Mitwilo	Mutwilo
2.	Tezani(?)	Mitwilo	Kutezwana
3.	Takulambidzi(?)	Mitwilo	(?)
4.	Mbidzi(?)	Mitwilo	(?)
5.	Tshiarabi	Mitwilo	(?)
6.	Mbidze	Mitwilo	(?)
7.	Takulana	Thakulana	Thakulana
8.	PALANA	PHALANA	PHALANA
9.	Impindje	Dangwana	Mpinzhe
10.	Pepera		Phepera
11.	Veve		Veve
12.	Indjinge		Ndzhangi /Mbuvhuli
13.	Tshiarabi		Tshiaravhi
14.	Takula	Thakule khulwane*	Thakula
15.	PALA	PHALA khulwane*	PHALA
16.	Tangwe	Dangwe	Dangwe/Tangwe
17.	Kolomo	Mazika	Kholomo
18.	Vevera	Mazika	Vevera
19.	Zika	Mazika	Ka mazika
20.	Zika	Mazika	Ka mazika
Bottom:	21. Zika	Mazika	Ka mazika

* *Khulwane* means “big” and may be omitted.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 157.

The point has already been made that the xylophones have no special note-names but borrow those of the reed flutes; this, however, is not the end of the matter. The interesting question which arises is whether the Venda, in transferring these note-names to the xylophone, attribute them to the keys having the same pitch as the respective flute-notes.

Dr. Westphal made a recording of the tuning of a Venda xylophone, assisted by Nedzata an old man, and a xylophone player named Mabalane. This tape is important for it includes a great argument between these two men as to the names which should be given to the xylophone keys and especially as to which note is *Phala* and which is *Thakule kbulwane*. The contention is twofold: First, which note is *Phala* — is it No. 14 or No. 15? Mabalane insists against Nedzata that Notes 8 and 15 are *Phalana* and *Phala* respectively. The second argument is whether *Thakulana* lies above or below *Phala*, the old man insisting that in the *Tshikona* flutes *Thakulana* is the higher of the two.

Why are these arguments necessary? Dr. Westphal points to one factor, that these men do not come from the main *Tshikona*-playing area and therefore are not so used to the flutes as are some experts. But that there is substance in this second argument can be seen by referring to the lists of reed-flute names given above: we see that while Kirby gives *Takulana* higher than *Phalana*, Stayt's *Tshikona* list places it lower.

It is, however, the first argument which is particularly fascinating, for we have Dr. Westphal's tuning record as a basis for study. Having assessed the tuning from this recording on a *Strobocorn*, we find that Mabalane's *Phala* is pitched at 179 V.p.s., which is halfway between the F \sharp and the F below middle-C. Now we have already found that *Phala* on the flutes is about B \flat below middle-C (circ. 230 V.p.s.). We are thus confronted with the surprising fact that when transferring the note-names to the xylophone, the Venda transpose their pitch about an interval of a fourth down — *Phala* drops from B \flat on the flutes to F on the xylophones. It needs little imagination to appreciate that if the xylophone is not well tuned, if — perchance — the key which ought to be *Phala* is a bit flat, there is scope here to argue whether this note or the next one higher is actually *Phala*, especially remembering that *Phala* exists in the Venda mind as a definite pitch.

A possible confirmation of this downward shift of *Phala* by a fourth on the xylophones is provided by a recording made by the South African Broadcasting Corporation which contains a tuning of a Venda xylophone and also some songs accompanied on it. Here is one of them:



N.B.—The notation shows the nearest notes in the diatonic scale.

Here we see that the xylophone starts a fourth below the voice and keeps with it in parallel fourths till it reaches the beginning of bar two. Here is a long note where the voice is singing the reed-flute-*Phala* and the xylophone is playing the xylophone-*Phala*. In addition to this, Dr. Westphal knows by experience approximately which key on the xylophone is *Phala*, and this key certainly does not sound B \flat — it is around F.

Now if *Phala* is a fixed note in the Venda mind — in the case of the xylophones, a note around F — F \sharp — then it ought to occur in all their xylophones. Does it? We set out below, first the tunings and note-names from Dr. Westphal's tape and then the tunings of some other Venda xylophones: the figures are in vibrations per second:

VENDA XYLOPHONE TUNINGS IN VIBRATIONS PER SECOND

	Westphal	Brit. Mus. ⁸	Berlin ⁹	S.A.B.C.
1. Mutwilo	739	—	—	755.5
2. Mutwilo	667	—	657	687
3. Mutwilo	590	—	617	617
4. Mutwilo	545	559	551	554
5. Mutwilo	510	507.5	490	502.5
6. Mutwilo	450	452	443	458
7. Thakulana	410	412	405	415
8. PHALANA	374	376	374	384
9. Dangwana	335	340	333.5	339(?)
10.	301	306	304.5	309
11.	268	276	275.5	277
12.	239	250.5	246	248
13.	218	225	226.5	226.5
14. Thakule khulwane ..	197(?)	204	204	202
15. PHALA khulwane	179	187	183.75	191.5 ¹⁰
16. Dangwe	161	171	168.75	166
17. Dzika	150	154	155	154
18. Dzika	136.5	142	147.5	139.5
19. Dzika	127	127	131.75	129
20. Dzika	(?)	119	119.625	117
21. Dzika	(?)	107	101.75	102.5(?)
22. Dzika	—	93.5	93	92
23. Dzika	—	78	80.625	83
24. Dzika	—	—	—	72.5

We notice that on each xylophone there is indeed a note in the region of F# below middle-C, for which we might assess a median frequency of about 182-184 V.p.s. Is it unreasonable to think that this is intentional? — that *Phala* on the xylophone connotes a fairly definite pitch of around 182 V.p.s.?

We can now see the force of the argument on Dr. Westphal's tape. The fifteenth note on the xylophone in question is 179 V.p.s.; this is a bit too low for *Phala*. On the other hand the next note up — *Thakule khulwane* — is (at my estimate) around 197 V.p.s. and this is too high; hence the argument.

The main conclusions we can draw from this discussion would seem to be these: the Venda note-names are a tribal memory which is old enough to show signs of fading, so that the significance of the words is lost and even their order is becoming uncertain, though some note-names are more stable than others, the most notably stable being *Phala*. *Phala* is the chief note and that on which the system is based: it is the "middle-C" of the system. Not only is it the prime in the order of note-names but it has also a pre-eminent musical importance. It appears to carry, in the Venda mind, a fixed pitch which on the reed flutes is about 230 V.p.s. and on the xylophones has a frequency of about 182-184 vibrations per second.

Note:—It may be of interest to note that the names of the pipes in the Pedi pipe ensembles immediately to the south of the Venda in the Northern Transvaal were given to me in 1948 as follows in ascending order:

Komo,	Makuluwane,	Palola	Tateli,	Sereku,	Pevero,	Peguli,
292	336	388	448	504	568	664
Palolana	Tatejana.					
748 (sharp)	848vs.					Ed.

⁸ No. 1958. Af. 4, 1.

⁹ Berlin III D. 3802, measured by Hornbostel.

¹⁰ It can be shown by internal evidence that this note is pitched too high in relation to the adjoining notes.