

KAFFIR MUSIC.



If one were to ask the average inhabitant of South Africa whether the Bantu tribes have any national music, the reply would almost surely be in the negative. It is known that the mission-trained native sometimes develops remarkable singing powers, and that he picks up part-music with strange facility; but in his natural state the native is supposed only to exercise his vocal powers in the "tshotsha," which is a lugubrious sound generated deep down in the throat, and suggests a commingling of the notes of the corn-crake with the noise made by the wind in streaming over the open bung-hole of an empty barrel.

Nevertheless, the Bantu possesses a music of his own; but this can only be heard, as a rule, if one frequent the celebration of his tribal ceremonies.

Many of the native songs and chants are very intricate compositions, in which the different parts are adjusted to each other with ingenious nicety. Such part-songs are probably extremely old, and have reached their present development very gradually.

It is not, however, with these that this article will deal, but rather with simple tunes which it has been found possible to note down as opportunity offered. Such may be of interest for purposes of comparison with the rudimentary music of other savage peoples.

The tunes given are mostly battle-songs, each probably struck out like a spark upon the occasion of some great tribal emergency.

In giving the following specimens of tunes collected among the Hlubi tribe, it may be of interest to indicate shortly, where possible, the historical episode to which each relates. The Hlubi tribe was one of the first to move in the great migration which took place from what is now Natal, early in the present century, before the onslaught of Tshaka, the Zulu king. The Hlubis were not, as a matter of fact, driven forth by the Zulus, but by another tribe, the Amangwanè, whose chief—Matiwanè, "the destroyer"—had evidently been incited by Tshaka to declare war. They fled across the Drakensberg Mountains to what is now the Orange Free State, and there led a life of continuous warfare for ten or twelve years.

The Hlubi chief Umti'mkulu* was killed, with nearly all his household. It was believed that not a single member survived. Afterwards, however, it transpired that his great wife, with her infant son, Langelibalèlè, † had escaped. The latter eventually died in exile, having rebelled against the British Government in Natal, in the early seventies.

Upon the death of Umti'mkulu, the chieftainship temporarily devolved upon his nephew, Sidinanè. This chief had a short and tragic career. His memory is revered among the adherents of the "right-hand house" of the Hlubi tribe, of which he was the head, and his pathetic story even now brings tears to the eyes of the old men.

It appears that after the death of Umti'mkulu, the Hlubis for a long time wandered about, in a great disorganised mob, over the wide plains lying between the Vaal and Orange rivers. They were exposed to attacks from the Zulus, the Matabele under Umzil'igazi, ‡ and the Amangwanè under Matiwanè "the destroyer." A number had already submitted to the Matabele chief, and been incorporated in his regiments. One night the Hlubis were attacked by a Matabele force, but they scattered under cover of the darkness, without making any resistance. Next morning they opened negotiations with the Matabele induna, and eventually agreed to submit to Umzil'igazi. The Matabele force was returning, laden with booty, from a raid upon the Basuto. Messengers were despatched to Umzil'igazi, informing him of the submission of the Hlubis, and asking whether they were to be destroyed or spared. Umzil'igazi sent back a message to say that the submission of the Hlubis was to be accepted, but that Sidinanè and every member of his family were to be killed. The latter part of the message was supposed to be kept secret, but it was communicated to Sidinanè by one of the Hlubis belonging to the Matabele force.

Sidinanè was a young man; his family consisted of a wife and an infant son. In the night he fled, accompanied by his wife and child, leaving the tribe in charge of his younger brother Sondaba, who agreed to personate him.

Sidinanè fled to Swaziland. On the way his child died of the hardships of the journey. He was kindly treated by the Swazi chief, but he could not rest. He departed for Zululand, and went straight to Tshaka's kraal. His wife refused to accompany him. Tshaka received him with civility, and agreed to accept him as a vassal. An ox had just been slaughtered, so Tshaka ordered Sidinanè to skin it. Sidinanè, after indignantly refusing to perform such menial work, wandered forth once more. We next hear of him as captured by the Amangwanè, and brought before the cruel Matiwanè. Tradition states that he was put into an enclosure in which a lot of bulls were fighting, and that he stilled them with a word. This raised the jealous wrath of Matiwanè, who at once caused the captive to be strangled. The chief Zibi, who is at present at the head of the right-hand house of the Hlubis, is looked upon as Sidinanè's son, but he is really the son of Sidinanè's brother, in terms of the practice as defined in the fifth verse of the twenty-fifth chapter of Deuteronomy.

Sondaba found it impossible to keep up his impersonation of Sidinanè. Umzil'igazi, however, forgave him the deception, and located him at a large military kraal which was situated about two days' journey from the "great place," and was under the command of a favourite induna, or general, called Soxokozela. Here he remained for upwards of a year.

Umzil'igazi sent for his new vassal. The great place of the Matabele chief was close to the present site of Potchefstroom, in the Transvaal, at a spot then called Ezinyosini, which means "the place of bees."

* "Big tree."

† "The sun scorches."

‡ "Bloody trail"—father of Lo Bengula; usually called "Moselikatse."

A great feast was held in honour of the guest. When Sondaba was led before Umzil'igazi, the latter was struck by the size of the young man's eyes, so he at once gave him the name of Mehlomakulu.* This name quite superseded the original patronymic.

Mehlomakulu was of splendid physique, and had all the bearing of a chief and a leader of men. Consequently he at once incurred the jealousy and hatred of Umzil'igazi. The latter was particularly struck by the superiority of his guest's dancing, as well as the clever way in which he flung his club into the air in the course of the dance and caught it again as it fell. The Matabele chief was heard to say, as he lifted his head to follow the course of the club as it soared: "You are blinding me,—you are breaking my neck." The death of Mehlomakulu was determined on, but he was allowed to return home in the meantime.

Shortly afterwards Mehlomakulu heard from a spy that he was to be killed immediately,—that an impi was even then assembling to fall upon him. He thereupon called together his principal men in order to discuss the situation.

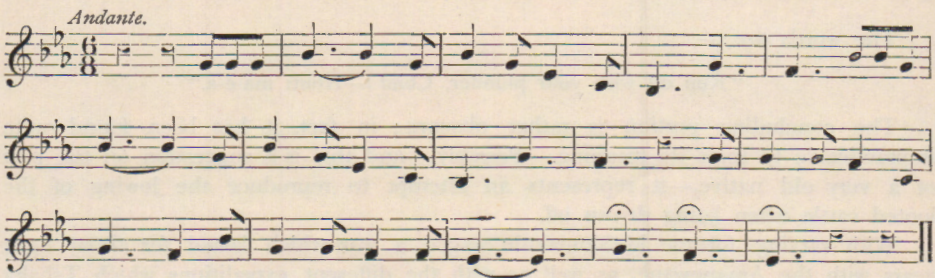
A number of Soxokozela's soldiers had left the kraal to meet the advancing impi. It was now only a question of hours: whatever was to be done must be done quickly.

With tears and many protestations of sorrow, the majority of the Hlubi councillors and headmen decided to leave their chief to his fate. "We are tired of wandering," they said; "Umzil'igazi is strong and able to protect us. Let Mehlomakulu go forth if he will; it is against him that the hate of Umzil'igazi is hot. We have lived for years gathering roots under the spears of Matiwanè; we will now remain as subjects of the chief of the Matabele."

While this was going on, an uncle and devoted adherent of Mehlomakulu left the meeting quietly and assembled his followers. With these he surrounded the kraal of Soxokozela, and killed the induna with every member of his family. The killing party then hastened back, flung down their blood-stained spears before the assembly, and told what they had done. The matter was now plain and clear: they knew that the killing of Soxokozela would never be forgiven by Umzil'igazi; that unless they fled the lives of all would be sacrificed.

So the war-cry,—a long "g" of the second line of the treble clef, which is wailed out with piercing shrillness,—was raised. All the other Matabele within reach were killed, the cattle were quickly collected, and the Hlubis fled to the eastward.

In commemoration of this episode the following song was composed by the tribal bard:—



The words run as follows:—

"Sondaba has killed Mehlomakulu: Mehlomakulu has killed Lihlongo (the latter being another of Mehlomakulu's names): Lihlongo has killed Sondaba."

* "Big eyes."

This somehow suggests "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor, etc."

The Hlubis managed to escape to a fairly strong position on the western bank of the Caledon River, before being overtaken by the pursuing Matabele. The latter came up just at nightfall. They were hungry and tired, but they nevertheless attacked without delay. There were a number of Hlubis in their ranks, but these at once deserted to Mehlomakulu's side. Then the Matabele fell back for a few hundred yards and halted. The Hlubi deserters told Mehlomakulu that the enemy would most probably make a night attack, so the Hlubi chief, with the pick of his force, stole quietly back and took up a position in some broken ground, which the enemy, if they attacked, would have to cross.

They had not long to wait,—the whole Matabele impi advanced stealthily towards the Hlubi encampment, but it fell into the ambush and was cut to pieces. Next morning the battle-field was found to be thickly strewn with the shields and spears which had been thrown away in the flight. The shields were piled together and burnt; the spears proved a welcome and much-needed addition to the Hlubi armament.

Then the following song was composed in honour of the victorious chief :—



The words are :—

"Spotted leopard, come out so that we can see you."

The next song also dates from this occasion :—

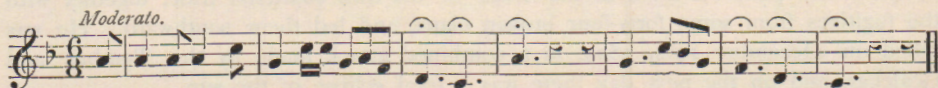
The words are :—

"Run off with your plunder, Chief!—Houti ma-e-a."

The concluding portion is rather obscure; in fact, it has been found quite impracticable to trace its meaning. Possibly,—and this is a suggestion on the part of a very old native,—it represents an attempt to reproduce the lowing of the looted cattle when being driven off.

With varying fortune Mehlomakulu waged a war which lasted for about eight years with the Amangwanè, as well as with the different expeditions which Tshaka sent against him and Matiwanè. It was a curious situation,—the Hlubis and the Amangwanè locked in a deadly struggle with each other, and being attacked, together or in detail, from time to time by Tshaka. It does not appear that the notion of combining against the common enemy ever suggested itself to either the Hlubi or the 'Mangwanè chief.

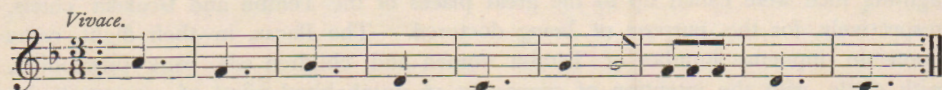
After a successful raid against Matiwanè's cattle, the following song was composed:—



The words are:—

“The Chief is pregnant with the number of cattle he has taken.—Ho, ho, ho, aha ; ho, oho, ho, ho !”

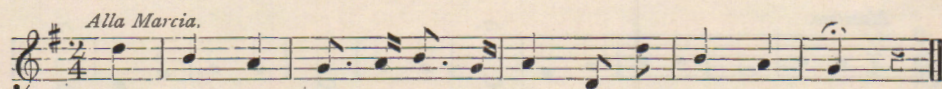
At one period of their wanderings the Hlubis were driven into the mountainous, inhospitable country that lies near the source of the Orange River. The following song is connected with this episode:—



The words of this song are:—

“The Orange River : It is far away : It flows : The Orange River : I see the mountains of the Zulus.”

What follows is the last of the Hlubi series:—



Its words are:—

“Ho, ho !—We call to the chief. He is as great as the ocean.”

Within a few years of the flight of the Hlubis, the Baca tribe was driven from its home, on and about the present site of Maritzburg, Natal. The reigning chief was Madikanè. Around his memory hangs an accretion of many legends. There is some ground for thinking that Madikanè's mother was a European, possibly a waif from one or other of the vessels which are known to have been wrecked on the east coast of Southern Africa toward the end of the last century. The words of one of the songs composed in his honour run somewhat as follows:—

“Mngcanganè (one of Madikanè's) names is an animal,—
Ho !—What shall we do with him ?
There is no chief who can conquer a white chief,—
Hi !—What shall we do with him ?”

These words clearly indicate the peculiarity of Madikanè's appearance, as well as that he was light of colour. The air to which these words are sung does not merit reproduction.

All authorities agree that Madikanè was of great stature, that he was light in colour, and that his hair and beard were long. It was his habit to carry his snuff-spoon stuck in the hair of his chest. One of the writers has examined a number of his male descendants, and found about one in every four with traces

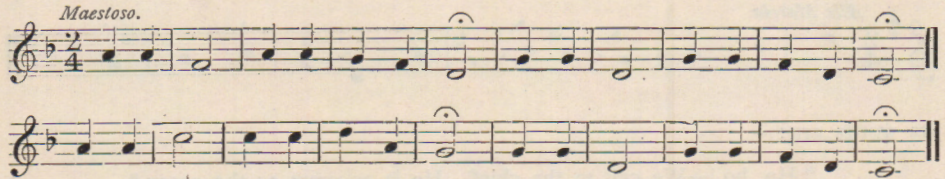
of hair on the chest. It is, it may be stated, very unusual to find any hair on the body of a Bantu.

Madikanè placed himself at the head of his own shattered tribe, together with the fugitives from some forty-four broken clans, and led them southward. He was killed on December 19th, 1824, in a combined attack made by the Tembus and Galekas, and on the next day there was a total eclipse of the sun.

The Baca women and children were all either killed or captured. Many of them wore ivory armlets, which had been put on when they were children, and which, consequently, could not be drawn off. For the sake of the ivory, the savage victors cut the hands off the unfortunate creatures and turned them abroad to die. Some few managed to make their way back, for over a hundred miles, to the valley of the Umzimvubu River—one of the former sojourning places of the tribe—and lived for many years. The last of these died only about eight years ago.

The eclipse on the following day was taken as a tremendous portent. All the fighting men were called up to the great places of the Tembu and Galeka chiefs, respectively, for the purpose of being doctored. The Bacas, in their flight, came upon an immense number of Tembu women and children who were proceeding, with cattle, with the intention of occupying an uninhabited piece of country under the Drakensburg range. These the Bacas captured and took away, so as to rehabilitate themselves for their losses, domestic and other.

The following is the tribal war-song of the Baca tribe. It is a tune held in great veneration, and is never used except upon important occasions. Sung in slow, stately unison by a number of men on the war-path, it has an indescribably impressive effect:—



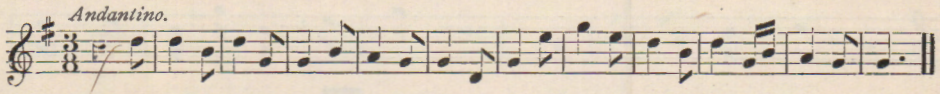
This song is apparently of great antiquity. Its words have quite lost their meaning. They are simply:—

“Eye ya how, eye ya yow yow yow.”

Tradition relates that when Madikanè was a boy he disappeared mysteriously. The witch-doctors told his father Kalimetsh not to be uneasy, as the boy would come back. After an absence of eight months he returned, saying that he had been in the forest learning the magical use of roots. He called to his uncle and two of his brothers, and they accompanied him to the place of his secret sojourn, driving with them a black ox. When they arrived at the specified spot the ox was slaughtered. Portions of the meat were then spread about for the use of the “imishologu,” or ancestral spirits, and then the tribal song was sung. After this the young man asked the others what they would like to be “doctored” for. The uncle suffered from a dread of being poisoned, and asked to be so doctored that poison should have no effect on him. The others asked to be so doctored as to become great fighting chiefs.

At the annual “incubi,” or “feast of the first-fruits,” which is held by the Bacas—when the chief rushes out of his hut after being doctored, and flings an assegai towards the rising sun—the tribal song is sung in full chorus by the assembled lieges.

Each individual chief adopts a song composed specially in his honour, and which is ever afterwards associated with him. In Madikanè's song there is an undertone of sadness, as well as a finish, which, in view of the fact that his mother was probably a white woman, might almost lead one to think that it had a civilised source. Possibly it may be a sort of reflection of some melody of her childhood which the mother had been heard singing. It is as follows:—

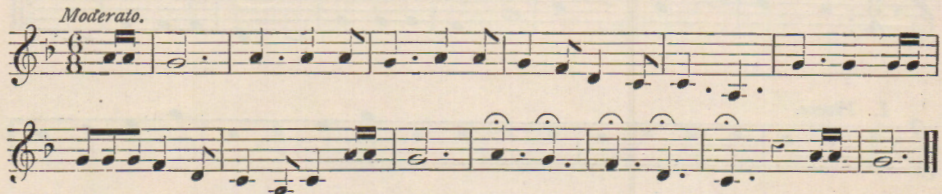


These are the words:—

“An assegai thrown among the Zulus, plays. You are a young animal to the Zulus.”

Madikanè's peculiar appearance is apparently again referred to in the foregoing.

The next is the song which was dedicated to the present chief, Makaula, upon his accession:



The words are:—

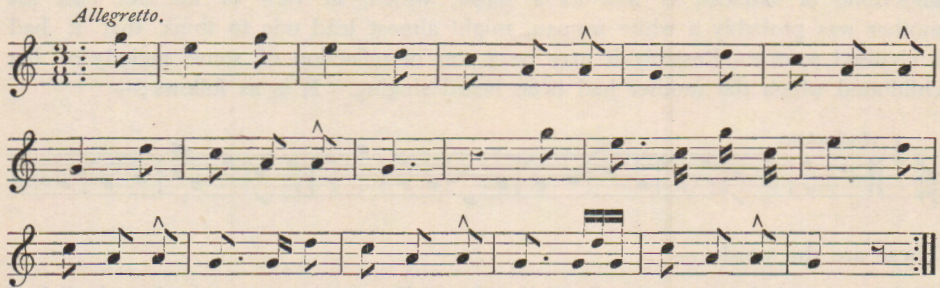
“All the chiefs opposed Makaula by name; they said he would never be a chief. He is the youngest of all the chiefs. Orange River” (with the last syllable repeated several times).

Makaula succeeded to the chieftainship when quite a boy, upon the death of his father, 'Ncapai, who was killed in a war with the Pondos in 1845. The mention of the Orange River has reference to the fact of the Bacas having wandered to its inhospitable source after being driven southward before the spears of Tshaka.

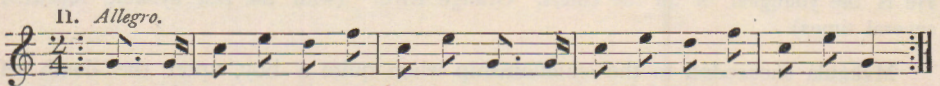
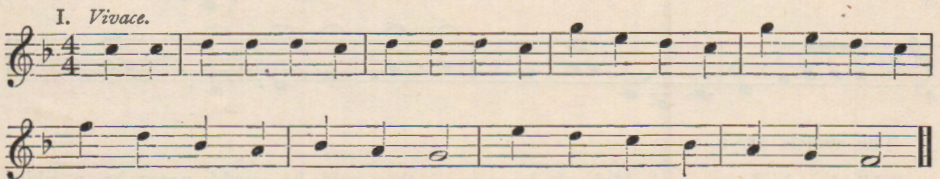
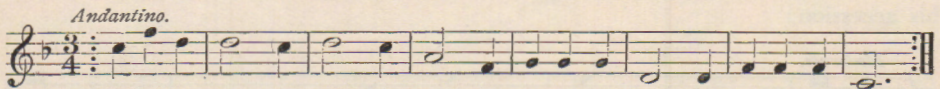
The two airs next following are danced to by the Bacas:—



The following air is common among all the tribes between the Shangaan country, north of Delagoa Bay, and Pondoland:—



The three last examples given are songs heard by one of the writers among the Tongas and Shangaans:—



In their songs the Bantu have never got beyond a few words set to a tune of a few bars, these being sung with monotonous repetition. In spite of their monotony, the songs have a wild charm which is all their own. The Kaffirs are as loyal to their chiefs as were the Scottish Highlanders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Probably among no other people in the world is the sentiment of loyalty so strong. In each of these simple melodies a treasured story lies embalmed and fragrant. Up to the present the habiliments of civilisation sit but ill upon the savages of South Africa, whose waning ideals are clustered around the leafless tree of ancestry as a swarm of belated bees cluster over the portals of a ruined nest. In singing their songs the natives reconstruct the departed glories of the grand old "houses" which have, as they themselves say, "withered," for a few fleeting and pathetic moments.

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WILLIAM CHARLES SCULLY.