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THE MBILA OR NATIVE PIANO OF THE T/OPI TRIBE

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As is well known, the xylophone is found almost everywhere amongst Bantu tribes, and therefore it might appear as an exaggeration to attribute it to a special and very small tribe, the Vat/opi. But this interesting instrument has been developed by the T/opi people with such a perfection that we might be justified in considering it as a distinct and genuine production of the T/opi genius. The other Bantu tribes surrounding them do not hesitate to call the Vat/opi the "masters" of the *mbila*.

Let me, to begin with, explain that a distinction is necessary between two different native instruments : the *mbila* and the *malimba* or *vulimba*. The *malimba* is a kind of small portable piano, whose keys are made out of old nails or any iron implement available. These have been flattened, cut into varying lengths so as to produce different sounds, and fixed between two other pieces of iron on a dry piece of wood, which is sometimes hollowed downwards to leave a flat sounding box. The flattened extremities of the nails are bent upwards, and the player, holding the whole instrument with the hands, twangs the nails with the thumbs. Sometimes he uses an empty tin as sounding box and attains a remarkable resonance. This instrument is the true *malimba*, which is not widely known in T/opiland, and which seems to be the native piano of the Vandzau. As some Central Bantu tribes call the true *mbila malimba*, I have thought it necessary to draw the reader's attention to the difference between the instruments. [1]

In this article I shall deal with the true xylophone or *mbila*. In T/opiland the native piano is called either *mbila* or *muhambi*. *Mbila* (Class *yi-ti*, pl.: *timbila*) is a word which is very well known in the whole country of Portuguese East Africa, south of the Sabi River, and is understood by Ronga, Thonga or Shangaan, Lenge, T/opi, Tonga people of Inhambane (*Vakoka*), and probably even by Ndzau people as well. *Muhambi* is a /ilenge word, understood also in true T/opiland [2].

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[1] I am told by Dr C. M. Doke that amongst Lamba people the *amalimba*—is actually the *mbila*, whereas the term *imbila* is applied there to a "calabash drum."

[2] In the class of nouns *m mi* - the syllabic *m* becomes *mu* before the aspirated h.

I. GENERAL

There is no evidence in T/opiland to show that the making of the piano was restricted to one special clan or to special families. Ntomu Buke, one of my best informants, says very definitely that anyone can make a *mbila* if he puts his heart into the job. The hand only is the talisman of the artist, and the tree is judged by its fruits.

Generally, when a T/opi native wants to make a piano, he goes to a well known maker, and borrows one of his pianos. He carefully takes mental note (T/opi being still an unwritten language) of the different woods employed, and begins to work. When he has completed his piano, he gives his model back to the owner, and pays a certain amount of money or gives a goat for the loan. One thinks of the way in which the first watchmakers in our Swiss Jura managed to get their extraordinary skill, *mutatis mutandis*.

As to the *mbila's* origin little is to be found. The native piano is known to have always existed amongst T/opi people. It is a T/opi feature, and as far back in the past as T/opi people have to look to find the roots of their social unity, the *mbila* is present in their memories. As the native piano is to be found in many other Bantu tribes, we suggest as very probable that the instrument existed before the actual differentiation of the existing tribes. The great point for T/opi people is that they have brought it to a very remarkable perfection. They are truly the "masters" of the *timbila*.

Ntomu Buke, who is an old man, told me that the *VakaMbuluvuzi*, or *NyaMtumbu* people, (cf. *Bantu Studies*, July 1927) borrowed their first *mbila* from the *VakaTsinyandana* or *Madondere* people, but that, on the whole, the actual clans found the instrument amongst the inhabitants of the Lebombo Hills on the north, the *Vakadibombwe*. Who these people were, it is difficult to ascertain. The actual inhabitants of this region are Thonga people of the Tengwe clans.

II. DIFFERENT KINDS OF TIMBILA

There are four different kinds of *timbila*, or at least four different sizes of T/opi pianos, as they are not fundamentally different.

The *t/ilandzana* (cl: *t/i-tsi*, pl: *tsilandzana*) or *malandzana* (cl: *m-va*, pl: *vamalandzana*) is the usual one. The Vat/opi use the two terms without distinction. This piano has generally twelve keys. In old times it had invariably ten keys, but in the last twenty years the makers have put twelve or even fourteen keys. But I have not seen more than that in T/opiland.

The *dibinde* (cl: *di-ma*, pl. *mabinde*) has also ten keys and its scale comes immediately below the *t/ilandzana*, somewhat like the cello below the violin.

Such also is the *didole* with bigger keys, but I have had no opportunity of stuying the exact relation between the *dibinde* and the *didole* (cl: *di-ma*, pl: *madole*).

The *t/ikhulu* (cl: *t/i-tsi*, pl. *tsikhulu*) has only one, two, three or four very large keys, sounding like a big drum, exceedingly low, almost as low as a European ear is able to distinguish between a sound and a mere vibration.

It is interesting to note that we have here the three great distinctions of European orchestras.:

the soprano, violin or flute, being the *t/ilandzana*,
the alto, cello or clarinet, being the *dibinde* or the *didole*.
the bass being the *t/ikhulu*.

Generally an able maker of *timbila* is likely to make any one of these four kinds of native pianos. But of course, there is a notable difference of achievement between individuals. The skill of Ntomu Buke is not easily beaten. Some of his pianos are real jewels, especially one *t/ilandzana* I had the good fortune to buy, which is a real piece of art. The proportions in that special instrument are almost perfect, and I must confess that I could not call such a maker an unskilled one. A good example of his skill is also to be seen at the Witwatersrand University's museum in the department of Bantu Studies.

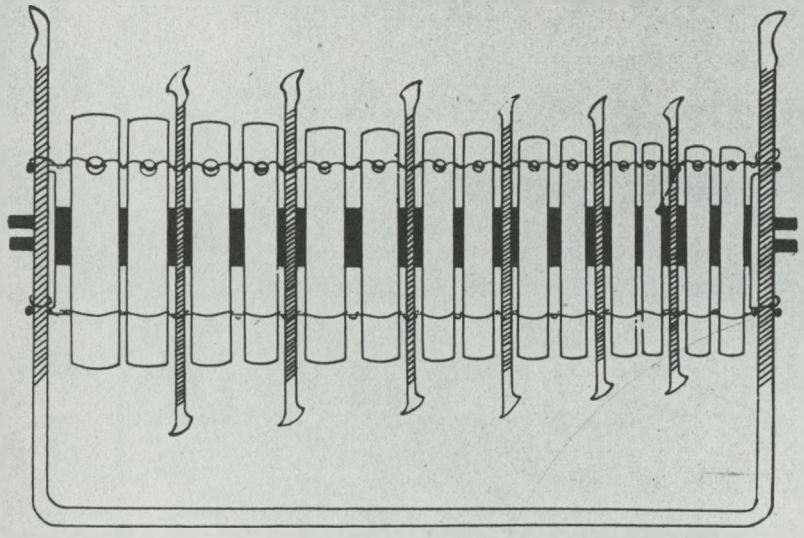
III. THE MAKING OF A MBILA

A. *Different parts of the instrument*

1. The "*mrwalo*" (cl: *m-mi*, pl: *mirwalo* — derived from the verb *kurwala* = to carry, to support) or "the stand" consists of three different parts. (cf. Diagram I) The stand itself is one long piece of wood, pierced with as many holes as the *mbila* has keys, 10, 12, or 14. The two other parts of the *mrwalo* are the two legs in which two holes are pierced to admit the two ends of the stand itself. The *mrwalo* is generally made of the *mkusu* tree (cl. *m-mi*, pl: *mikusu* — the *mafureira* of the Portuguese or *Trichilia emetica*).

2. The *mrari* is the curved branch which forms the frame on which the strings and straps holding the keys will be attached. It is made out of *m/epa* wood (cl: *m-mi*, pl: *mi/epa*), a small tree or even a shrub, whose wood is very flexible and tender. To carve it is very delicate work. The maker chooses a straight branch, without defects, takes out the bark when still freshly cut, and curves the wood little by little, wrapping the edges with green pineapple leaves, lest the wood should crack, and in order to let it dry slowly. The branch thus curved is held between three pieces of wood, driven into the ground at

IV.



Makhokhoma (keys) held in position by *tikhole* (soft skin straps).

extremity above the keys. Ntomu says it raises the tone ; I have been unable to verify this assertion.

No doubt the making of the *makhokhoma* is not easy, but the tuning is obviously the most delicate task, and it is very interesting to observe a good maker tuning a new instrument. He tries the key, compares its tone with that of his model, puts his ear to it, sometimes approving unconsciously, and very often attains a perfect similarity of tone, which proves that the Bantu people have a correct ear, and that their scale, different as may be from ours, is not a hazard but a product of the will and taste of the people. (cf. Diagram IV).

6. The *dikhokhoma* or key, being placed on the two supporting strings is firmly fixed on them with two other straps, the *tikhole* (cl: *li-ti*, sing: *likhole*)—but not too firmly however, leaving a certain amount of vibration to the key. The *tikhole* are made out of a soft skin, generally goat's skin. From one end of the *mrari* or bow, the upper *likhole* is now passed under the big string or *lisinga*, then over the key, passing through a hole in the key itself, then under the string again, then back through the hole and over the same first key, now under the string between the two first keys, then above the second key in the same way, now under the lisinga and round the first support or *nyamangana*, and so on (cf. Diagram IV).

7. The sounding boxes or *mathamba* (cl: *di-ma*, sing. *dithamba*) entail a very patient search. They are the shells of the fruit of the *thamba* or *nsala* tree of the Vathonga (*Strychnos spinosa*). In a well made piano, they must correspond in size to the keys or *makhokhoma* ; that is to say, the first key of the *t/ilandzana* for example, being a rather large one, the first *dithamba* must also be rather large—the second a little smaller, and so on to the last one, which is very small. Each sounding box is very tightly attached to the stand, so that the hole made in its surface corresponds exactly to the hole of the stand, or *mrwalo*. The strings employed for this purpose are the fibres of the leaves of the *mlala* palm tree, so largely used in basketry. All spaces between the boxes and the stand as well as the small holes which admit the *milala* strings are well closed, or carefully covered with wax or *muhula* so as to render the sounding box airtight.

8. A hole is made on the side of each *dithamba* or shell, and on it is placed a small macrophone and a vibrator. The sounding box is placed on the *t/iwawa* (cl. *t/i-tsi*, pl: *tsiwawa*) or small macrophones, exactly on the side hole of the shell. These macrophones are fixed to the sounding box with wax (*muhula*). When the wax has dried the macrophones hold well in their places. The *tsiwawa* must also be

proportionate in size to the sounding boxes and the keys; and therefore a very patient search is necessary to procure them. These *tsiwawa* are the shells of the fruit of the *mhungo* or rubber tree (*Landolphia kirkii*) (cf. Diagram V).

9. The makers of the *timbila* were not pleased with the sound obtained in that way, and so thought of making a small vibrator, placed on the side hole of the sounding boxes. These vibrators or *makhosi* (cl: *di-ma*, sing. *dikhosi*) are made out of the diaphragm of a small rodent, the *khweva* or *hlati* of the Vathonga, a kind of small jerboa. This vibrator is also fixed to the hole with wax.

This inadequate description of the making of a *mbila* will give an idea of the difficulty of this work, and will perhaps show how much ingenuity there is sometimes in the native mind, which many regard as altogether unproductive.

After this it is not difficult to explain how disappointing the *timbila* to be heard on the mines of the Witwatersrand are to any one who has had the privilege of hearing a genuine band of T/opi pianos. These have very little in common with the noisy and metallic *timbila* of the mines. The *makhokhoma* of the native pianos on the Witwatersrand are very different from those made at home, in T/opiland. No *muendze* is available and the keys are made out of planks or any flooring board to be found. This light wood is unable to give the beautiful quality of tone and the neat sound of the hard wood of the bush. Still worse are the *mathamba* which, in Johannebsurg, are made out of old tins of different sizes; it is a pity to compare the metallic sound obtained in that way with the beautiful effect of Madatin's orchestra.

Still it is extraordinary that even in these conditions the musical genius of the T/opi people is so evident, that it impresses itself upon the musician who hears the T/opi bands on the mines.

CUSTOMS CONNECTED WITH THE MAKING OF A MBILA

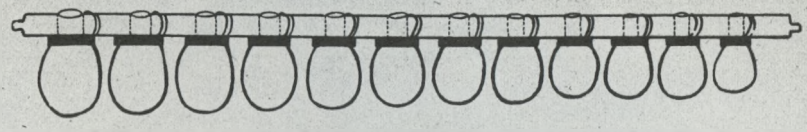
It is not an easy task to grasp fully the significance of native customs and I have not been able to find very much on this particular subject. However, the idea of "medicines and magic" seems to be not altogether absent in the making of a *mbila*.

Ntomu Buke has been given the recipe for the "potent" making of a piano. It was given to him by his father who was also a well known maker.

It is first necessary to find many *mirende* (cl: *m-mi*, sing: *mrende*) or medicines. The maker must find the roots of a number of trees: the *t/inuŋgunuŋgu*, the *dikwayakwaya*, the *mrangeleŋguva*, the *li-*

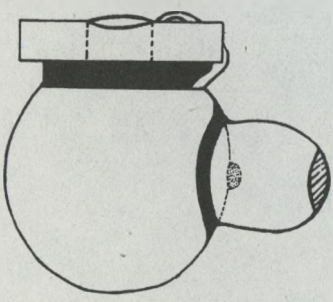
V.

(a)



Mathamba (Sounding Boxes) held in position on the *mrwalo* by means of *mlala* fibres, the *tsiwawa* (macrophones) being made airtight with *muhula* (wax)

(b)



1 3 2

1. Lithamba (Sounding Box)
2. T/iwawa (Macrophone)
3. Dikhosi (Vibrator) within the macrophone

kumbakumba, the *likwakwati*, the *ntsantsa* and the *nama*. These roots are burnt and the ashes preserved. Then he must find the larynx of a lion, *mkolo wa ŋgonyama*, burn it and preserve the ashes. The same must be done with the head of a big stilt walker, the *nyamaŋganana* whose voice is very strong and whose cry is very strange. Lastly, he must cut off the head of a small song bird, the *dirututu*, burn it ,and preserve the ashes.

All these ashes are then coagulated with *mnyatsi* or the fat obtained from the *mafureira* (*Trichilia emetica*). It is then the *mbila* medicine and is put into a pot.

This medicine is used to rub the *mbila* thoroughly, especially at the orifices. "Well", said Ntomu, "then the *mbila* is *bound* to sound very loud (*Mbila yi na hanela kupfumisa kaditsuri*.)

The interesting point in this description of the *mbila* is the idea which underlies the use of a certain number of substances: The layrnx of the lion, even when pounded into ashes will magically preserve the terrific power of the lion's roaring, and impart it to the instrument. The strange cry of the *nyamaŋgana*, which nobody can hear without a feeling of uneasiness, will be imparted in the same way to the piano by the bird's head being pounded into ashes, and so too will the *mbila* possess the suavity of the *marututu's* song.

We may have here a good example of sympathetic magic. But, in these questions, one would do well to remember the wise sentence of Bishop Callaway in his book "The Religious System of the Amazulu" (1870): "Nothing is more easy than to enquire of heathen savages the character of their creed, and during the conversation to impart to them great truths and ideas which they never heard before....." And however vast may be our actual knowledge of primitive life and mentality, before admitting fundamental theories let us remember the nice Thonga proverb: "*U ŋga tsutsumeli huku, u tamele munyu manɮeni*" i.e. "Don't run after the hare with salt in your hand". Do not be too hasty with a solution.

IV PLAYING ON THE TIMBILA

This is also a very difficult subject, because of our European conceptions and musical taste. Our ear is accustomed to the European harmony and a proof that many get with some difficulty into another system is the general "tolle" which modern music has raised with its wonderful polyphony.

The player of a T/opi 'piano takes the two *tikhongo* or drumsticks, which have been prepared by the placing of a lump of the rubber sap of the *mhungo* tree (*Landolphia Kirkii*), called *wundandi* (cl: *wu-ma*) in the

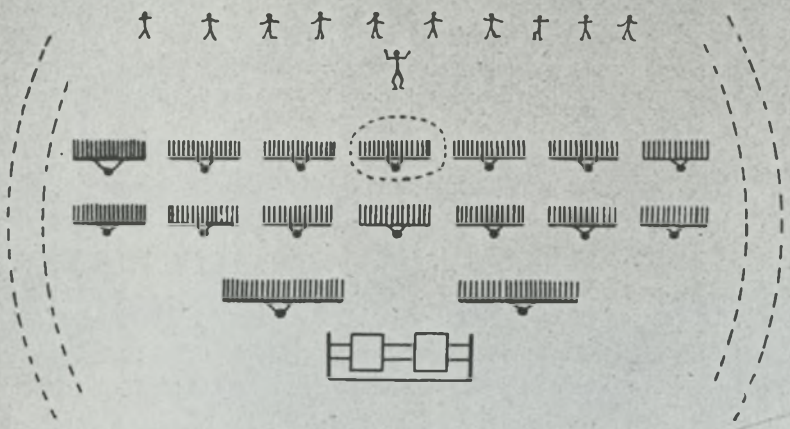
two ends. He ordinarily, but not necessarily, plays the melodic phrase of the theme with the right hand, and accompanies with the left one. This melodic phrase, sometimes really fascinating, is exemplified and developed in many ways ; but it very often turns into the somewhat fruitless monotonous chant so dear to all Bantu peoples.

The rhythm is very interesting. It is very seldom a simple rhythm. Often one analyses a 2/4, a 4/4, or less often a 3/4 ; but sometimes it takes quite an extraordinary and unusual time. I remember once hearing a rhythm which was very nearly a 7/4 and alternating with a rhythm which I felt unable to analyse. Very often one notes compound rhythms. By this I do not say that there is confusion ; on the contrary the natives are on the whole far more developed than we are in this respect and eurhythmics has no secrets for them They know it by instinct.

But the most interesting point is native polyphony. It requires a thorough study, and gramophone recording will be of very great value for this work. In a very interesting paper on native music [3] the author seems to deplore our ignorance of the principles of Bantu music—and I cannot but affirm how much I agree with such a view. It is a very great pity that we missionaries and white people in general have seen nothing better than to impose upon natives our occidental principles without trying to understand and develop the native ones. Many thought, at the beginning, that native songs were purely and simply mistaking the right laws of harmony, whereas it is now perfectly clear that native music is governed by law, and by a peculiar and most interesting system of polyphony. We have often thought that primitive people were actually primitive in all the manifestations of their genius. This is probably erroneous. Every student of Bantu, acquainted with the strict laws of primitive society and family relationship, as well as with the most delicate laws of primitive language, knows that primitive polyphony, far though it may be from our western harmony, is nothing like cacophony. The gramophone records already collected furnish a proof of this statement. But of course with more material and a thorough study of the question it will be possible to realise more fully the interest and value of native music. Some are inclined to think that perhaps, in this respect, the study of Bantu music, instead of leading to an impoverishment of our harmonical system, may eventually prove that we have to deal with a very rich and comprehensive system of sounds. No doubt the native lacks constructive power, and the T/opi is not an exception to that rule. His music often becomes tedious because he does not seem

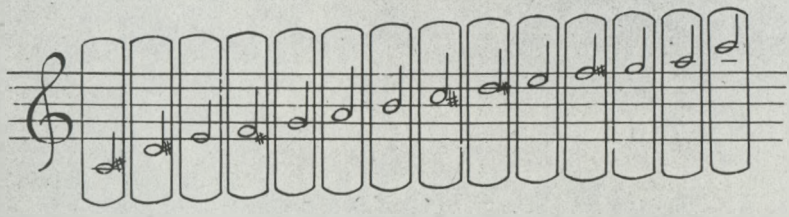
[3] *Africa*. Vol I, Jan 1928—"African Negro Music" by E.M. von Hornbostel.

VI.



"Msaho wa mkoma" at the kraal
of Chief Maɗatin, Zandzamela

VII.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Tonic Scale of the *t/ilandzana*

to feel the need of any development at all or logical amplification of a musical theme. He can play the same phrase for a whole day or a week if he is fond of it, without any signs of fatigue. But this indigency of mind does not prove anything as to the perfection of his polyphony.

It is certain that the native's taste, when he is trying to accompany a theme, likes the "fourth" rather than the "third" tone—and it imparts at once to his songs or instrumental performances an altogether different atmosphere from that of our own songs. This atmosphere is by no means unpleasant, and those who have been seated around the fires in the evening, when the women freely tell their tales and sing of their rich folklore, will agree with that statement. All the more naturally will those who have had the privilege of hearing a band of genuine T/opi pianos.

The *mbila* plays its part in every great occasion of the T/opi social life. When the chief calls the men to the great *mbila* dance the *msaho wa mkoma*, especially at harvesting time, all the country would run to it if it were not for the fear of forced labour. Happily the authorities have set apart a certain number of good players in Maʁatin's country who are exempted from forced labour.

The *mbila* is still used in the women's dance the *tinginya* (cl: *yi-ti*, sing: *yginya*) as well as in the boys' dances of winter time, the *ygalayga*

The writer will always remember the first occasion on which he heard a genuine T/opi band of seventeen *timbila* at Maʁatin's kraal, in *Zandzamela* (cf. *Bantu Studies* July 1924). It was a real *msaho wa mkoma*; there was no official feast organised by the white authorities, the men were playing for their own pleasure at their headchief's village. Even if it be somewhat outside the scope of a scientific paper it may be interesting to give a description of this.

From a far distance we had already noticed the strange and powerful polyphony of the orchestra. Entering the chief's village, built in a most fascinating way under old *mafureira trees*, with all the skill and *savoir faire* of T/opi workmen, we found the dance in full swing. All at once we saw a rather strange and unusual spectacle: Between the orchestra and the dancers, where the boy making the rhythm was standing (cf. Diagram VI), the women who had been assisting as spectators only, irked by their forced immobility, were entering the circle of the performers, and their screaming as well as the contortions of their tattooed stomachs, interesting as they were from an ethnological point of view, were rather vulgar to European eyes. But natives cannot resist rhythm and music, and despite its crudity, the scene was not lacking in beauty. Little by little the

mbila, the real king of the day, impressed itself upon us. It was extraordinary how fascinated we became by the quality of the sound emitted by the instrument : nothing metallic about it, a neat, pure sound, something like our European xylophone, of course, but very much amplified, far more effective and powerful—the veritable "music of the woods" of this beautiful country. The fact that no metal enters into the making of a *mbila* may perhaps account for the real beauty and softness of the sound produced.

The band itself consisted of 17 pianos of the usual types : 14 *tsila-ndzana* of the ordinary sizes, placed in two rows (cf. Diagram VI). In the middle of the first row was my informant Ntomu Buke, as headplayer. Behind the rows were 2 bigger *timbilu* or *mabinde*—and behind these one *tʃikhulu*, the big bass with its large keys. There was no *didole* on that occasion.

We were very much struck by the discipline of the performance Ntomu, as headplayer [4] always gave an exposition of the theme once, sometimes with a small fantasial development, and then without any warning, at least perceptible to our eye or ear, the whole band would strike in. In front of the players a boy, *mdotho wa ndʒele* (the boy of *ndʒele*) was just marking the rhythm with the *ndʒele*, a round metal box filled with small red seeds, the *milambi* (these seeds, very small and hard, red with a black spot, are used in many dances—put into empty shells and used like rattles). In old times, of course, there was no metal box and the shell of a calabash was employed.

Behind the boy, facing also the *timbila* players were eight warriors, bedecked in the splendid trappings of T/opi soldiers, with their assegais, their shields, and their beautiful ornaments : ostrich feathers and sheep skins around the ankles and the arms. (cf. Diagram VI).

It is necessary to insist on the point that music is so natural to a T/opi orchestra, rhythm so obvious, that there is no conductor—there is no need of any. The headplayer starts, he does not conduct. This fact is especially easy to observe when the band, tired of a theme, begins another.

When the band began, it was with a long theme, approximately like that shown on Diagram VII.

This notation [5] is not adequate—and themes like this can only be reproduced adequately when recorded with the phonograph. This

[4] I say head player not conductor because in T/opi orchestras there is nothing like our western conductors.

[5] In this scale the notation is not absolutely adequate. The tonal space between 2 and 3 does not agree with ours, the sound being higher than that to which we are accustomed. The same takes place for the tonal space between 6 and 7.

theme was repeated and repeated again—always the same musical phrase over and over again, with some slight differences in polyphony, variations in rhythm, in the dancing figures, or in the intonation of the singers. But what confounded us was the extraordinary intuitive sense of gradations of T/opi musicians. Perhaps it will seem an exaggeration, but the writer never heard in any European orchestra a more perfect association of *diminuendo* and *ralentando* at the same time. Having reached the utmost of its sounding capacity, the band began to reduce it, passing through all the different gradations of sound from the *fortissimo* to the *forte*, *mezzoforte*, *piano*, *pianissimo* —holding at the same time the pace, starting with a fast *allegro*, almost a *prestissimo*, and little by little receding to an *andante*, to the *adagio*, to the *largo*. We were really holding our breath, because it was quite un unexpected experience, to hear such perfection in the bush, far away from civilisation.

It was a song of war, glorifying the chief, scorning his enemies; and after the highest pitch had been attained, the rhythm was following the depression of the vanquished as well as the happy rest of the subduer.

The *ensemble* of a European orchestra is the result of a long study—and here was this African *ensemble* at once given by nature, by the musical instinct of this native race. Such a fact is explained, I think, by the simple reason that the African native realises the depth of his soul through its social expression : he actually lives and feels in society.

Such experiences make one realise that there are some directions in which primitive society has gone far enough in its development to enable us to learn from it.

And such performances, as well as the ingenuity of the *timbila* makers, make us hope that the musical genius of the Bantu people will one day give birth to a great musical production.