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The Poetry of the Bachopi Ballet

HUGH TRACEY

The Bachopi live outside the borders of this territory of Southern Rhodesia, between the mouth of the Limpopo River and the little town of Inhambane near Cape Correntes in Portuguese East Africa. And as such they do not properly fall within the usual scope of this publication. But they are one of those tribes which is intimately connected with the people of Rhodesia. It is believed they came to the coast in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries from the valley of our Lundi River, though their earlier migrations are unknown. Their language also is said to be similar to that of the Balhengwe of the lower Chibi district. The Portuguese records show they must have had a large proportion of Karanga blood brought in most probably by the refugees of those days fleeing from the conquering Warozi who established their kingdom of Monomotapa in the northern part of the Karanga domain immediately south of the Zambesi.

The chief claim to fame of this tribe is its consistently high record of musical skill from those early days until now. The 16th century Portuguese missionaries often mentioned them in flattering terms as the people who enjoyed good music and instruments. The excellence of their music must be heard to be believed. So, in cold print, we have to be content with a mere description of the action and the poetry of the ballet. This is taken from my notes which were hurriedly scribbled while the performances were on. They were written in October, 1941, and unfortunately I have been unable, so far, to obtain a translation of the poems.

I use the word ballet (or ballett) in its older meaning of a singing dance rather than in the sense it has come to acquire with the Russian Ballet. It illustrates no story in particular though some of the movements are representative of attack and defence so common in folk dances.

This short description of the performances of the Bachopi which as far as we know have been done for at least four hundred years, may give us a glimpse into the future of African music if it would follow the lead of these able musicians.

In 1940 I had the good fortune of meeting Bachopi musicians for the first time and took a few measurements of their xylophones, the *Timbila*. Again in 1941 through the kindness of the officials concerned, particularly of the Administrador of Zavala District, Quissico. Senhor Dr. Luiz de Vasconcelos, I was given the opportunity of seeing four Bachopi orchestras and sets of dancers perform their distinctive national ballet. They were the dancers and players of *Zavala*, *Mavila*, *Kisiko* (Quissico) and *Zandamela* (Mahlatini). The Administrador and his wife not only gave me the hospitality of their beautiful home overlooking the Lagoa, the dunes and the ocean at Quissico, but they also arranged for the performance of each ballet on four consecutive days in early October.

My first impressions of the musicianship of the Bachopi were more than confirmed. Since I was now prepared for what I was to see, my field notes were much improved and on this visit I was able to get down much more detail, especially of the poetry which accompanies the dancing. This was dictated to me after the dance was over, and in the case of three orchestras (*Msaho Wetimbila*) was sung over again by the singers with the orchestra, to check up line for line. Folk singers always seem to have difficulty in remembering how the words of their songs go, unless they sing them through again; and in reciting them they are inclined to leave out whole sentences, and, what is important to poetry, all repeats.

My field notes of these performances are far from complete but they may be found helpful to those who like myself find far greater enjoyment in African arts if something is known about their construction and of the inspiration of the artists who originate them.

The poetry of the Bachopi exemplified in these Ballets (a word I use for lack of a better name) is remarkably mature and shows a keen sense of poetic construction however localized the subject matter. Undoubtedly the combination of poetry, orchestral music and dancing has tended to mould their verse into regular stanzas. It has been said that it was the association of religious dancing with poetry that gave rise to our typical European verse form in hymns. The necessity of fitting in the words with the full orchestral accompaniment requires the composition of fixed rather than impromptu verses. The looser forms are more common to Africans who use a choral instead of an orchestral accompaniment sung by the common people and not by skilled musicians. In this case the ground is a constantly repeated short phrase in parts, in parallel or in unison, to which the chanty-man fits in what lines he pleases. But when groups of dancers perform together they demand an exact scheme to which they can work or they would not know when to come in or when to stop; in other words, performances which combine the three elements of dancing, orchestral accompaniment and verse mutually discipline themselves into regular prearranged stanzas, which tend to depend less and less upon the whim of the players, singers or dancers, and throw the responsibility upon a leader who alone must take the decisions which round off the performances as a whole. It is perhaps the development of this characteristic in Bachopi music which is so arresting upon first acquaintance in comparison with other African musics and the one which is most likely to attract European musicians as it conforms to a regularity which is, to them, understandable and readily written on paper.

NADA: Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department Annual xxi, 6 (1944)

The sound of the words sung by the dancers (and less frequently by the players) forms a highly rhythmic contrapuntal melody to the orchestral ground. The ground is a regular motif or combination of motifs (according to the pitch of the *timbila* which do not by any means always play in unison), grouped into series of so many at a time, maybe three, four, five or more which together form the basis of the complete melodic sentence. The use of a short motif or measure, as a constantly repeated unit to be built up into the completed sentences seems typically African and may to a great extent account for the vitality of most African music which thereby avoids the pitfalls of excessive rubato and over-sentimentalising.

The lines of the poems seem to fit into an exact number of these motifs or measures, and either follow each other without a pause or break off for the playing of a set number of measures. In writing out the poems I have placed the lines together where they followed on, but where the orchestra interpolated a number of measures the space of a line is left. This determines the verses or stanzas, which admittedly, to one insufficiently acquainted with the language to understand the words as they are sung, are more obvious on paper than they are during the performance.

The effective use of repetition is very noticeable. The last line of a verse is often repeated, in part or in whole, at the start of the next, and the final verse sometimes accompanying the musical coda was often a repeat of the opening lines of the poem.

The speed with which they sang their words gave the singers' voices an instrumental quality which admirably fitted in with the percussive quality of the *timbila*. Unlike the orchestral music the singing was mostly in strict unisons, though occasionally they made use of harmonies, especially the fifth above, to indicate a change of movement.

There is little doubt that a full analysis of the music and poetry of the Bachopi can only be made by careful recording. I have now seen and heard enough of their unique art to be assured that the study would be most enlightening and also complimentary to the undoubted musicianship of the Bachopi xylophonist.

LIST OF THE MOVEMENTS IN THE FOUR BACHOPI BALLETS
OCTOBER, 1941

ZAVALA	MAVILA	KISIKO	ZANDAMELA
1. Mutsitso <i>a</i> <i>b</i> Mutsitso Kambe (1) Mutsitso Kambe (2)	1. Mutsitso <i>a</i> <i>b</i> <i>c</i> 2. Mutsitso Wembidi 3. Kungenisa 4. Mdano Wokuita 5. Mdano Wakusinya 6. Chibudu 7. Mkata Ndindo 8. Mabandhla 9. Njiriri Chinoteka	1. Nsitso <i>a</i> <i>b</i> 2. Nsitso Wembidi 3. Ndano 4. Mzeno 5. Yakusinya 6. Yakusinya Wembidi 7. Ndindo 8. Mbandhla Moyiso 9. Mushongolo Kugwita	1a. Mutsitso Wokukata 1b. Mutsitso Wembidi 1c. Mutsitso Wamuraru 1d. Mutsitso Waumune 1e. Mutsitso Wamthlanu (Wakugwita) 2. Mungeniso 3. Mudano 4. Mgupo (Mdande Yokata Kusinya) 5. Chitewewe Chombide 6. Mzeno 7. Mabandhla 8. Mteewe Chambarasi (Chokugwita) 9. Chokugwitissa
2. Kungenisa <i>a</i> <i>b</i>			
3. Ndindo			
4. Njirere <i>Break</i>			
5. Kungeniso			
6. Ntano			
7. Joosinya			
8. Ndindo			
9. Kusinya			
10. Kugwita			
11. Mabandhla			
12. Chitoto			
13. Kugwitissa			
	<i>Repeated twice</i>	<i>Repeated twice</i>	<i>Repeated twice</i>

The table above shows the names and sequence of movements performed by the orchestra and dancers during the course of a Bachopi ballet. Each village has its own ballet and the names of the movements are not always the same (as the table shows). But they are similar in general progression and on closer acquaintance one should be able to distinguish them readily.

It seems clear that the full ballet is in two halves of nine movements each, the two being the same or nearly the same as each other.

At Zavala, it appears, they cut it short, leaving out five movements of the first half. (They would not guess that any European would notice the difference anyway.)

It is apparent that I have not yet determined the full titles for each movement, which seem to have both a name and an explanatory title, such as *Mdano (Wakusinya)* the *Mdano*