

mount Chief, I have broken the oath.'<sup>1</sup> The *Howusu* himself was the last to swear, and he did it in these words: 'I am now your head; if I act evil against you I shall die; if any one acts evil against me, he will die.'

All the chiefs then drank wine out of a glass and Gadzezu said: 'We have finished carrying out our customs. Drinking out of this glass means unity and progress; therefore ye all drink it for the well-being of our country. After these words he handed the glass to Anku Ampim II, chief of Sököde, who is the first in everything, and who said: '*Howusu*, you are now our Paramount Chief, therefore you are to keep us informed about everything, and we shall do the same with you. If we want to do you harm, we must die, and the same in your case.' When he had said this he drank, while Gadzezu held the glass. Gadzezu and the *Howusu* were the last to drink, the chief of Sököde holding the glass for Gadzezu, and the latter for the *Howusu*.

This was the end of the ceremony. The stool-father M. D. Kōsi presented the two stool-priests with a sheep, two bottles of gin, two pots of palm wine, and a guinea.

(Communicated by Missionar PAUL WIEGRÄBE.)

### *The Ethnology of African Sound-Instruments.*

I have read with great interest the recent essay<sup>2</sup> by Erich von Hornbostel upon 'The Ethnology of African Sound-Instruments'. Its fullness and thoroughness and, for the most part, accuracy, make it a very valuable guide for ethnologists.

There are, however, several categorical statements in it which, in my opinion, require revision. One of these involves an error so serious that I feel constrained to draw the attention of your readers to it immediately, in order that they may not be misled into arriving at false conclusions which they may easily base upon it.

The error in question occurs in the section dealing with the so-called *sansa* (p. 297), where Hornbostel states: 'Africa has, however, produced a number of forms so characteristic that their occurrence outside that continent could not possibly have escaped notice. They present difficult problems to ethnologists, the most difficult of all being that of the *sansa*. Nowhere, even in Europe (with the exception of the musical box), do we find anything similar, on which the fancy of the evolutionist could build a theory. . . .' And again: 'A weighty argument for the recent date of the instrument is the fact that it is nowhere mentioned in literature before the nineteenth century (Sachs)'. The second of these statements, backed as it is by the powerful authority of Curt Sachs, would appear to be final; nevertheless in my opinion it is wrong.

The *sansa* (to use the commonly accepted name of the instrument) was known to European travellers long before the nineteenth century. It was

<sup>1</sup> i.e. the oath of 'the evening of the Ho people'.

<sup>2</sup> *Africa*, vi. nos. 2 and 3.

seen, heard, and described by the Portuguese João dos Santos, and his record of it appears in his famous document *Ethiopia Oriental*, written in 1586 and printed as a quarto volume in two parts in the Dominican convent at Evora in 1609. Dos Santos, it will be seen, recorded the name of the instrument *ambira*, which is identical with that by which it is known in that part of South Africa at the present time, although in modern orthography it is usually spelt *mbila*. The entire passage, in which other musical instruments are also described, is as follows (I quote from Theal, *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, Capetown, 1901, vol. vii, pp. 202-3. Theal also gives the original Portuguese text):

‘ These Kaffirs ’ (the Macarangas) ‘ have another musical instrument, also called *ambira*, very similar to that just described ’ (the resonated xylophone), ‘ but it is all made of iron instead of gourds, being composed of narrow flat rods of iron about a palm in length, tempered in the fire so that each has a different sound. There are only nine of these rods, placed in a row close together, with the ends nailed to a piece of wood like the bridge of a violin, from which they hang over a hollow in the wood, which is shaped like a bowl, above which the other ends of the rods are suspended in the air. The Kaffirs play upon this instrument by striking the loose ends of the rods with their thumb nails, which they allow to grow long for that purpose, and they strike the keys as lightly as a good player strikes those of a harpsichord. Thus the iron rods being shaken and the blows resounding after the fashion of a jew’s harp, they produce altogether a sweet and gentle harmony of accordant sounds. This instrument is much more musical than that made of gourds, but it is not so loud, and is generally played in the king’s palace, for it is very soft and makes but little noise ’.

I may add, in passing, that Dos Santos’ description of this instrument was referred to by Bent in his *Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, a work familiar to all South African ethnologists.

The existence of this description destroys at once the idea that the *sansa* is of recent origin. It also explains what Hornbostel omitted to mention in qualification of his first statement regarding the distribution of the instrument, that, like the xylophone, the knowledge and use of the *sansa* was carried by negro slaves to America, in certain areas of which it has been found by travellers and ethnologists. Two references will support my assertion of this fact:

1. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Catalogue of the Musical Instruments of Oceanica and America*, by Frances Morris. New York, 1914, p. 243. ‘ Ewbank (*Life in Brazil*, pp. 92, 111, 112, 117) illustrates and describes the *zanzee* (which he calls *marimba*) as an instrument in common use among the slaves, who play African airs upon it.’

2. *La Généalogie des Instruments de Musique et les Cycles de Civilisation*, par le Dr. Georges Montandon. Genève, 1919, pp. 40-1. ‘ *Sanza d’Amérique*. On sait que les ancêtres des nègres d’Amérique ont été principalement importés de la Guinée. G. Maurice reproduit comme “ banza ” des nègres des Antilles

françaises une sanza à 14 touches de fer, chevalet postérieur et barre de pression rectilignes, chevalet antérieur en arc de cercle sur une planchette, à angles arrondis, cintrée de gauche et de droite, plus large en avant; la planchette est fixée sur une calabasse. Berne possède une sanza des nègres du Brésil rappelant le type de Loango, type *e*, en primitif et en petit.'

Is it possible to believe, as one must if Sachs's statement is accepted, that these American forms arose no earlier than the nineteenth century?

The word *mbila* is in itself very interesting. It is applied by certain tribes not only to the *sansa* but also to the xylophone, as Dos Santos noticed in his day. The Venda of the Northern Transvaal and the Tshopi of Portuguese East Africa both call their xylophones by this name. I have, however, reason to believe that the word *mbila* actually means the aggregate of the wooden slabs (or of metal tongues), and perhaps even the succession of sounds constituting the scale or mode to which the instrument is tuned.

(Communicated by PROFESSOR P. R. KIRBY, Professor of Music at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.)

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