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The study of folk culture was a product of specific cultural and political movements and changes in 19th century Europe. Industrialization and the rise of nationalism pushed scholars to study the songs, stories, riddles and rhymes of earlier generations. For some, this amounted to a romantic rebellion against the modernising centralism that was crushing the rich and varied cultures of rural Europe. They had to capture this world - its regional costumes and crafts as well as its beliefs and customs - before it was smothered by the homogeneous functionalism of the industrial bourgeoisie. The Romanticists stress of folklore, as much as their appreciation of pastoral poetry and painting, was a product of their idealization of country life and their rejection of the social forces and grime of industrialization. They sought to record folk culture, its costumes and crafts as well as its beliefs and customs, before it disappeared.

The study of folk culture was construed of as a form of psychological archaeology. Folklore was interpreted as a system of beliefs that explained events and accounted for various phenomena in terms that the peasant could understand. Folklore was not just a collection of romantic ballads, fairy tales and picturesque legends, it was rather a highly functional grid of knowledge or beliefs that provided the peasant with a measure of control over a hostile environment. Folklorists believed that ballads, tales, riddles and rhymes were archaic expressions of folk culture and that they provided a glimpse of European cultures as they were before being distorted, or rather

corrupted, by Latin Christianity. It was the folk culture of the peasantry, that sector of the population least affected by cosmopolitan wordliness, that best reflected the supposedly pure, original national culture. To Ralph Vaughan Williams folk music captured the "true English spirit", just as, to the Grimm brothers, folktales represented the ethos of the Germanic volk. Folklorists thus held that their work provided an insight into European prehistory. It was this concept of folklore, of its function and uses, that was carried out of Europe and into the expanding world at the end of the 19th century.

Europeans, equipped with their belief in evolution, conceived of people living on the edge of their world as 'primitive' or roughly at the same stage of development as pre historic Europe. To study the beliefs and customs of, inter alia, African societies, was to throw light on the lost European past. This was a major motivating factor behind the compilation by Sir James Frazer of a number of comparative beliefs and customs into his The Golden Bough. One of Frazer's principal informants was a young Swiss missionary, active in South-east Africa, named Henri-Alexandre Junod.

Junod was not only in touch with the world's first professional anthropologist. He also kept in contact with Arnold van Gennep, the father of French ethnography who headed the museum and occupied a chair at the university of Neuchâtel from 1912-15. The demise of Frazer and van Gennep, a large part of whose work comprised the collection of folk

songs and tales, was in many ways paralleled by the demise of folklore as an academic discipline. Frazer was rejected as an evolutionist while van Gennep, who described societies rather than analysing how they functioned, was pushed aside by the new discipline of sociology. Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown and their disciples regarded the study of folklore as a colourful but impractical pastime and relegated its practitioners to the status of antiquarians. Nor did folklore have anything to offer to the political history being practised on both sides of the Channel.

It was really only in the 1970s, in the rush to produce a people's history or history-from-below, that historians turned to folklore. In January 1976 Terry Byres, one of the founder editors of the Journal of Peasant Studies wrote of Scottish peasants and their folksongs

> that they capture something at least of the human dimension which is often missing from our abstract categories (essential as these categories are). We can sense the texture of their everyday lives; identify some of the continuities which must have persisted for centuries; catch a little of their response to cataclysmic changes which destroyed traditional relationships and threatened to drive them from the land, reconstruct the morality by which they lived their lives; and guess at the nature of their consciousness (false or otherwise), from the themes upon which they dwelt and the themes they seem to have ignored.[1]

The JPS published a number of articles on folksongs, generally drawn from the less developed areas of Europe. The History Workshop ran two articles on folksong collecting in late 19th and early 20th century England.[2] Across the Atlantic, Lawrence Levine used the work of the early folklorists as the foundation of his brilliant cultural

history of black Americans.[3] This new interest in folksongs, stories, riddles and rhymes was fully legitimized in the eyes of the anti-antiquarian left when it received E P Thompson's blessing.[4] More recently folktales and stories have been analysed in order to recapture the world view and belief system of 17th Century France.[5]

In Africa, songs have been used to register the different perceptions and attitudes of various participants in the Rwenzuwuru movement in Uganda. These songs bring out in a poignant manner, the sadness of the oppressed Konzo and Amba and highlight their political consciousness and determination to resist the neighbouring Toro kingdom as well as the central government.[6] A number of Mau Mau songs from neighbouring Kenya have been brought out in a compilation published by Zed Press.[7] A compilation has been made of the songs of oppressed peasants and serfs in south-western Ethiopia.[8] Alpheus Manghesi has wonderfully recaptured the peoples' history of colonial southern Mozambique in his wide-ranging collection of peasant and worker songs.[9] But for the African historian the pre-eminent work, comparable only to that of Levine, is the analysis of the songs of plantation workers, in Mozambique's Quelimane district, and those of Chopi miners in South Africa, undertaken by Leroy Vail and Landeg White[10]. Little of this work has as yet been undertaken in South Africa; my own experience of song collection and analysis has been confined to the districts south of the Limpopo river, stretching from the Zoutpansberg down to the coast.[11]

Songs have always formed an integral part of the way in which people in the area expressed themselves. Boatsmen, hunters, traders, travellers, soldiers and others sang about their experiences. Initiation, marriage, death and other turning points in life were all recorded in song. Important events such as wars, natural disasters and the coronation of a chief, were all held in the collective memory of song. There were children's songs, love songs, songs of possession. It was natural that Europeans should see songs as a means of penetrating the belief system of the people amongst whom they worked.[12]

The Luso-gaza war of 1894-95 provides a good example of the way in which songs may be used to recapture contemporary popular conceptions of an historical event. By the early 1890s the Portuguese were attempting to expand their control over the Delagoa Bay hinterland. As part of this policy they intervened in a local succession dispute in order to replace Mahazule, the rightful heir, with a Portuguese surrogate. Members of the Mazwaye chiefdom expressed their fear of Portuguese intentions in the following song

> Young chief, do not speak too loudly
> Imitate the small elephant.
> Young chief! We call you Mahazoule!
> You should live far away in Johannesburg
> We fear your being deported on the sea and having to leave us.[13]

Another song, that became popular throughout the area at the time, expressed the same sentiments

> Alas! poor Mahazul, the white man calls you!
> O Mahazul! Why does the white man call you?
> Alas! poor Mahazul, he calls you in order to ruin you
> The white man wants to seize you and take you to Mozambique.[14]

These songs convey various ideas; the fear that the chief, like several of his contemporaries who had opposed the Portuguese, would be exiled from his people. This was an extremely serious threat for the chief, as the link between the ancestors and the people and the centre of much of daily life, held the chiefdom together. The songs express a feeling of apathy or fatalism before Portuguese imperialism and recommend, as the only means of resistance, flight to the mines of Johannesburg.

When the Portuguese declared war on Mahasule in August 1894, they called on the neighbouring Mpfumo or Zihlahla chiefdom, under Nwamantibyana, to supply them with auxiliaries. The young chief, barely out of his teens, rejected the advice of his elders that he should collaborate with the Portuguese, and mobilized his army. The Maswaye and Mpfumo then drove the Portuguese back into Lourenco Marques and laid siege to the town. During this period of victory large numbers of men reported for military service at Nwamantibyane's camp. Thousands of warriors in massed ranks, chanted war songs such as

> Come on! Let them come so that we can see them
> the people of the enemy country.

They fortified their courage with other war songs in which they recalled the victory of Nwamantibyane's father, Zihlahla (1867-83) over a Portuguese usurper named Nwayeye

> What will you succeed in doing to him, Nwayeye?
> You take the country and slay the people.

The army would assemble and, banging their assegais in unison on their shields (ji, ji), they would reply, in response to the regimental soloist's call to

> obey! obey the chief! Ji! Ji!
> Yes we are going to cross the immense river
> the river of the chief![15]

These songs reproduce the spirit of victorious soldiers ready to brave the unknown, both spiritual and territorial, for their chief. But the tone of their songs altered soon after their defeat in September 1895 and the deportation of Nwamantibyane to Cape Verde.

> Poor Nwamantibyane
> Who was beaten by the whites
> And who is now far away
> because Gungunyane did not help him![16]

This song places the blame for the defeat, squarely on the shoulders of the Gaza chief Gungunyane who had failed to protect the 'rebel' chiefs from the Portuguese. The song is a lament, expressing much the same feeling of nostalgia as is captured by another song, recorded by Junod in January 1896 on the Lourenco Marques waterfront. The work rhythm of the hundreds of stevedores employed in unloading goods from the waiting ships was maintained by a professional soloist who chanted

> Glory be! He fought against the whites
> Its the child, the child they have killed, Nwamantibyane
> Glory be! He fled as far as Khosen
> Its the child, the child they have killed, Nwamantibyane
> Glory be! He was seized and deported
> Its the child, the child they have killed, Nwamantibyane.[17]

This became a popular lament, constantly improvised on in order to catch the sadness of defeat. Thirteen years later, Junod heard the same song, performed by a young man, about 60 kilometres north-west of Lourenco Marques. Seated in the shade of a tree next to a store he accompanied himself on the gora

> It is the child
> they have chased him away
> they have killed him
> they have chased him away
> although he was still young
> the whites took him and exiled him.[18]

Both the lyrics and the tune had changed over the previous thirteen years. The song had become less melancholy but still served to remind people of the fate of the young chief and to warn them of the ever-present menace of the Portuguese. This provides an example of the fluidity with which songs changed over time. The lament had been taken up, popularized and, probably in communal situations, improvised upon. The song would be built upon, snatches of new tunes and lyrics added to pre-existing bits, until its popularity faded.

As the shibalo system developed in southern Mozambique, people started to sing of their experiences under forced labour. As early as the mid 1890s, Junod recorded one of these songs

> Stones are very hard to break
> Far from home, in a foreign land.[19]

A few years later another missionary recorded a similar chant, filled with the resentment of the forced labourer, in Lourenco Marques

> The whiteman's work does us harm
> the whiteman's work does us harm.[20]

These chants are the ancestors of the many shibalo songs collected in Mozambique by Alpheus Manghezi. They also have parallels with old riddles such as the following

> What is it that is all over the square at Machakene,
> that creeps and crawls about on it?
> It is the louse.

This riddle gives some idea of conditions at the village of Machakene, formerly on the edge of Lourenço Marques, where men arriving from the interior would pass the night before venturing out the next morning to look for work.[21]

Across the border, in the north-eastern Transvaal, fewer songs were recorded by earlier pioneers. But fieldwork will unearth a rich stock of songs that provide an admirable tool for writing the history of the more recent past. One of the major recent events stored within the collective memory is that of forced resettlement.

Each community has its own archive of song on this traumatic disruption of their lives. Many of the songs are extraordinarily moving because of the simple way in which they express the fear of removal.

> We shall be eaten by lions and elephants and hyenas
> GG will carry us all
> We shall cry for ever
> it doesn't matter.[22]

The term GG applies to the three ton Bedfords, with their "government garage" number plates, that are used to relocate people. Another removed community expresses much the same fear.

> We are going, they are all crying
> We will die without talking to God this night
> We are leaving to-night
> We will die without uttering a word.[23]

Other songs are mixed with the hope that their newly defined 'homeland' will offer some respite after their expulsion from Vendaland. A powerful onomatopoeia expresses the confusion of the move

> GG is carrying us, the people of Gazankulu
> Let's go and see Gazankulu, let's go, let's go
> The goats are also shouting, mêmêmê on the other side
> and the fowls too, shout kwêkwêkwê on the other side
> and the grass of the GG trucks is flap-flapping up and down.[24]

Many songs go beyond description and the evocation of a particular sentiment. Some rely on an intimate knowledge of the subtleties and interpretative ramifications of local terms. The words Mananga, Nyamazana and, in Venda, Gandlanani are redolent with the insecurity and fear of the isolated areas; hot, dry and insalubrious, into which people in the northern Transvaal were often resettled.

> Gandlanani
> Running away with the Shangaans
> Oh Gandlanani
> My heart is sore and I am restless
> I am calling my friends
> I am running away with my friends
> I am being carried away by the GG
> Left at home I feel alone
> Even when things go well I feel alone
> I will run away with my friends if they agree.[25]

This song invokes, through the use of the term gandlanani, the distant, dry area to which the Tsonga-speakers have been sent. The Venda singers declare their sorrow at the disappearance of their neighbours who have been moved to Gazankulu under the government's ethnic consolidation policy.

In much the same way as Westerners have devised historical categories such as the Mfecane, Renaissance or Great Trek, the word forms used in some songs may encompass an entire system. The Paiva songs that Vail and White have collected in Quelimane district invoke a historical relationship of patron-client that has become intimately personalized. The term Paiva, originally the name of a powerful local prazero (José de Paiva Raposo), has come to represent the Sena Sugar Company. The workers' perception of the system of mutual obligation exercised on the plantations is magnificently caught in songs that address Paiva as "mother", "father" or "the big one/elder".[26] Resettled Makuleke villagers have used the term Bidela in much the same way in their songs.

> Heee! Bidela!
> You have deceived us
> That wild country
> We are leaving to stay in the Xingwedzi country
> Heee! Bidela!
> We shall leave and go to Xingwedzi.

W.A. Biddell was the native commissioner who, after long negotiations, in 1933 promised the Makulekes a secure tenure to their land. In this chant the term Bidela has become a symbol that encapsulates all the problems caused by threats of removal. The fear of removal, the settlement of 1933 and the final duplicity of their forced removal are all

concentrated and refracted through the name of the man who represented the Native Affairs Department in the north-eastern Transvaal for some twenty years.[27]

An analysis of songs allows the researcher a glimpse of the belief system and value structure of people whose cultural perceptions differ from his own.

> Go into the Mananga
> They take us into the wild country
> We have left our figs and our mafura and lala beer
> We have left our graves behind us at this place
> We are being overcome at the wild place
> We have left our wild fruits
> And there is no relish in this place
> Malnutrition is destroying us.[28]

This song indicates areas of material and spiritual importance that might have been overlooked by a historian. Songs can thus help us grasp the very special conceptual framework used by people who do not structure their world according to the criteria of the modern historian. Any person wishing to write peoples' history has to attempt to distance himself from his own perceptions of the world and has to try to understand the conceptual system that drives the community he is studying.

Songs are particularly useful in that, unlike much of other oral history, they do not downplay conflict within the society. Songs have traditionally functioned as a psychological release as they allow people to transcend accepted social restrictions by expressing deeply-held feelings. By verbalizing repressed feelings, songs provide people with an individual release without threatening the solidarity of the community. Just as Quelimane plantation

workers were permitted to castigate their overseers in vituperative songs, people removed to the mananga of the north-eastern Transvaal would publicly dress down their chiefs for having failed to protect them.

> Makuleke knows it (about the removal)
> He just pretends not to know
> A heee! tell our chief to come and see the unbelievable (the removal)
> Makuleke knows it
> He is just sitting comfortably
> Makuleke knows it
> But he is relaxing with his feet up.[29]

Many songs have a didactic function. They teach right from wrong and, in a time of change, provide a moral stability. These ethical songs are more a blueprint of what society should be than a reflection of reality. An analysis of songs, as much through what they exclude and distort as through their content, allows the historian to come to grips with the mental constructs and beliefs that motivate those surface actions and events that are the concern of traditional history.

> How can you arrest me when I'm like this?
> I'm fat, I'm stout. I have fat in me (chorus)
>
> Matavani is also fat
>
> (chorus)
>
> How can you arrest me, catch me when I'm like this?
>
> (chorus)
>
> Even Mjaji, she's also fat
>
> (chorus)
>
> At Borchers, we used to eat oranges and bananas.[30]

These former labour tenants challenge the morality of their removal by stressing how happy and contented they were when

they lived on Mr Borcher's land. Their songs contrast this golden age with the bleakness of their present position.

One of the great values of songs as an historical source is that they express a form of communal consciousness. The music is polyphonic, in that one person sings a solo and the others respond in chorus. This gives it enormous potential for spontaneity and improvisation. As we saw with the song recorded by Junod at the turn of the century, neither the lyrics nor the tune are static and the song has no final version. It is created and recreated whenever people meet and it lives as long as it expresses popular feelings. In this way, songs are a more reliable historical source than oral tradition and testimony. They are a collective and anonymous product that cannot be distorted by either the interviewer or the performer.

* * *

Other songs that give an insight into the changing consciousness of people in the rural areas are those of individual Christian composers. These people grew up within the confines of the mission station and their music - both tonal and lyrical - expresses their separate evolution. According to D.T. Marivate, a leading composer in the north-eastern Transvaal

> I had not the opportunity of mixing with outside people of my colour. We, children of the mission station lived under strict supervision. We were not even allowed to go and see heathen dances. We were not allowed to go to circumcision schools. We were not allowed to sing any song such as is sung outside by non-Christians. I remember one day in 1915 when I was a young teacher straight from college I went to witness dancing and singing performed by non-Christians at a certain kraal. When the white missionary learnt that I and another teacher had gone there to see the dancing we were

> punished. We were ex-communicated. We were disciplined for 3 months. Why? Because we had gone to look at the dancing and the singing of heathen people.

Marivate goes on to state, not surprisingly, that "since we did not have the rhythm and style of Bantu songs in our blood, we composed after [the] European style under which we grew [up]."[31] Hymns sung in the Tsonga idiom established by the mission, were a particularly important means of evangelization as they were readily accepted into the oral culture of non-literate peoples. Hymn-singing spread far beyond the mission outstations, introducing people to the Christian ethic, producing new converts and reinforcing and encouraging the faithful. Hymns were a vital arm in the struggle against the old order; the chief was largely replaced by the missionary as the father of his people, and his God, rather than the ancestors with whom the chief mediated, became the invisible power. However many of the Christian songs were secular in nature.

In 1930 Marivate went to England with two other African composers.[32] The songs he recorded for Decca were noticeably influenced by Sankey, the American folksong composer and by other popular western folk tunes. But at least one of the Decca recordings contained a local perception of an event of historic importance - the widescale land expulsions of the early 1930s that pushed African "squatters" off white-owned land and into the reserves.

> This country of Spelonken
> Is a very pleasant country
> This country of Spelonken
> Is a very pleasant country
> But now we are chased away
> And sent to the arid country

Number one, number two, no. 3, no. 4
Stay well
Number one, number two, no. 3, no. 4
Remain in it (the country)

It is full of fruits and grasses
And water and tall mountains
It is full of fruits and grasses
And water and tall mountains
And now we are chased away
And sent to the arid country.

chorus - (Number one etc.)[33]

Other Christian songs reflected a new identity that was far wider than the old chiefdom. They often express a consciousness that is at once nationalist and Africanist.

The great benefit of the Christian songs is that many have been preserved - either written down or recorded. By analysing with which figures and actions in the bible Christians identified themselves, we should be able to learn a great deal about evolué society in the rural areas. Songs should also help us uncover the perceptions of other regional communities in South Africa. A rich folklore seems to exist on the farms of the Western Cape.[34] Afrikaner nationalism has produced a rich fund of songs, as has the Africa liberation movement.[35] The songs of the African working class present another important field of enquiry.[36]

Despite their obvious potential as a source for writing people's history, songs have to be analysed with care. The translation is crucial. Songs are generally in the local dialect and contain terms and ideas, geographical locations and references to individuals that will not be accessible to someone unfamiliar with the area. The songs should always be

supported by the oral testimony of their performers, A Christian interpreter might change the essence of the song by, for example, "helping" the interviewer by giving the song a name. In so doing he imposes his own emphasis on what he thinks important. Christian modesty might also cause the translator to censor references to the sexual organs (penis, vagina etc.) and even terms like rape. The interviewer's perception of a village can also be manipulated if the singers only perform one sort of song. In this way villagers can lead the fieldworker to believe that their experience of life has been overwhelmingly dominated by, for instance, drought and famine or resettlement. The veracity of didactic songs that portray a golden age has to be checked by use of air survey photographs, rainfall charts, cross-checking oral evidence, written sources etc. Ideally the interviewers should contextualize the song in its accompanying dance and musical styles. S/he should also attempt to determine how representative the songs are of general opinion.

Songs and folklore in general constitute, as is the case with all oral evidence, merely one more strand in the tapestry of sources available to the historian.

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