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TRANSVAAL NDEBELE

By

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Before saying anything else we must explain that the Transvaal Amandebele are nothing whatever to do with the Amandebele who are found in Southern Rhodesia. The Transvaal Ndebele are a Bantu tribes of Zulu stock who live scattered about in the North and East of the Transvaal Province of South Africa. Though both Amandebele tribes have their origin in the Zulu-Xhosa group of people and though both once dwelt in Natal, the Transvaal Ndebele moved into the Transvaal long before the Amandebele under Mzilikazi. Their language is also very different from other forms of Zulu speech. Mzilikazi left Natal at the beginning of the 19th century, fleeing from the Zulu despot Tshaka. When Mzilikazi and his Amandebele followers arrive in the Transvaal, they found the land inhabited by various Sotho tribes. Among these Sotho tribes were living the Transvaal Ndebele about whom we are now speaking. These people had emigrated from Natal at least a hundred years before, and probably earlier. They are directly descended from the old Ngoni tribe in Natal who existed before the Zulu tribe rose to power. In Natal they were probably a separate Ngoni race living under the Chieftainship of Musi. While in Zululand they lived at "Lundini" near the * Qathlamba mountains. Musi had five sons - Manala, Matombeni, Dlomo, Ndzundwa and M'Hwaduba. These sons all quarrelled over the chieftainship and the tribe split up into five sections, each under one of the five sons. Of these, four migrated

into the Transvaal and eventually became one tribe - now known as the Transvaal Amandebele. The fifth section of the tribe (under Dlomo) remained in Zululand and was eventually driven out by Tshaka. The tribe moved southwards and were known as the Langalibalele people. They are now referred to as the Amahlubi. Later we shall be giving a separate talk about these Amahlubi.

When the four tribes arrived in the Transvaal they probably found the country inhabited by the mixed tribes of Sotho origin. Eventually these tribes were reinforced by the people whom we now know as the Northern Sotho or the Bapedi. Living as they did among many Sotho tribes the Ndebele could not avoid being influenced by both the Sotho culture and the Sotho language. In fact some of them have become Sotho in everything but in name. Others among them however are very conservative and have clung to their traditions. This goes particularly for the AmaNala who have not intermarried so much with Sotho peoples and who have always kept themselves to themselves. The greater part of the Manala tribe still live in the neighbourhood of Wallmannsthal, 20 miles to the North East of Pretoria. They call themselves AmaNala and their language isiNala. The ruling family, that of the chiefs, is called Mabhena. These people are probably the direct lineal descendants of the original Manala who emigrated from Zululand. The Mabhena family are the family with whom we are chiefly dealing with in this talk, because 1. They are the purest stock and 2. Because more is known about this branch of the family than about any other branch. The great majority of this family are still living in conditions in which they lived many years ago. Many of the women folk still wear the old dress, with skin petticoats and bangles of brass and bead work. On festival occasions this national dress is much worn. The men on the other hand incline more to the wearing of European clothes. The traditions, stories and legends of these Ndebele peoples are particularly fine, the Izibongos, or praise

songs being more poetic than those of any other tribes. It is a great pity that so much of their folk lore and tradition is now dying out because the tribe is a small one and in no other tribe have the legends been handed down so accurately.

Among the old ceremonies of the Transvaal Ndebele is the "luma" ceremony, which is worth describing. In the month of February, before the new moon has yet appeared, the chief sends messengers to let the men know that the chief says "it is the season." Before the chief has done this, no fresh fruit of summer is eaten, such as pumpkin, vegetable marrow, maize, sugar cane or anything else. From that day onwards the Ndebele "hlonipa." That is they abstain from using certain words - for example instead of saying "amabele" (the word for kaffir corn) they say "utyani" which is the word for grass. Then, until the new moon appears they begin counting the nights, one, two, three four and so on. Then perhaps on the ninth night they will go to hear the flute being played at the chief's kraal. The children spend the night in the open in order to hear the "ipandula" (flute). At midday the next day, after the flute has stopped playing, the chief performs the luma ceremony. The boys drive a bull into the cattle kraal. When it has arrived there, the chief gives his son, the future chief, a piece of sugar-cane, which he takes and strikes the bull with. The bull then goes out to pasture again. The chief, having done this, gives his sons a pumpkin, and they first bite a piece which they spit out, and the rest they eat. They do this in order of their age. The chief then calls the men to take the pumpkin and bite it. The pumpkin is cooked, and then sliced up into small bits. All partake of the pumpkin. When this has come to an end, they go to the court of the chief, where the chief will dance. He comes out of his big hut, enters the circle where they all sit, puts on his ceremonial kaross, while the men hold his spears and sandals for him. He sits among the assembled men who sing a song which goes "Vumo - they hate the chief, Vumo." The Chief then gets up and engages in a sham fight. When he has finished, he fires

a gun - bang - and they all rush out into the veld, in the direction that the chief has pointed his gun. Everyone rushes out except the chief himself and the very old men. Then they return to the Chief's place and dance. After that beer is produced and eaten. There is dancing and the night is spent there. Next day there is more dancing and singing. On the third day the assembly opens its sessions and cases are heard.

If the chief wants to marry a girl on that day he sends a man out who points her out and says "This is the wife of the chief." The girls will weep and all the people will lament, but she cannot go anywhere else and cannot be married by any other man but the chief.

There are many fine Ndebele legends and folk tales which cannot be related here. The most famous of all are the "Izibongo" or praise songs. Every Ndebele family has its own Izibongo, which have been handed down for centuries. There is always some imbongi in the family who knows the songs and who can recite them when the occasion demands. The recitation of the izibongo is an invocation of the ancestral spirits only. In this way the Izibongo of the Ndebele are slightly different from those of the Amazulu who recite praises of present as well as of former chiefs. Tshaka for example was in the habit of hearing Izibongos which he himself praised. The recitation of the Izibongo by the Transvaal Ndebele is seldom undertaken unless all those present have taken a sip of beer and squirted it out for the ancestral spirits (amadlozi). The Ndebele say that the amadlozi would strangle the imbongi if he failed to give them their due. When reciting the izibongo the imbongi hold an ubhutshulo in their right hand and brandish it about. The ubhutshulo is a stock of about four feet long, with a tuft of ostrich feather at the top and it is used on all ceremonial occasions. There are many other interesting customs and legends of the Transvaal Ndebele - many of them taken from the old days in Zululand. But the important thing to remember about this tribe is that it is nothing to do with the Rhodesian Ndebele.

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