

# SONGS OF LIBERATION

By SCIPIO AFRICANUS

**F**EW things reveal the depth and breadth of the ideological changes that are taking place in the African more than a study of his songs. And in this article I am actuated by the urge to reveal these changes so that those who are interested in studying the African's development might understand that his restiveness and intolerance with the *status quo* is an outward manifestation of urges that are far too deep-seated to be suppressed by legislation or by the mere stroke of the pen; that his impatience with his subordination is woven into the warp and woof of his very being. An appreciation of the attitude thus revealed gives the lie to the popular feeling that the African is not aware of his condition and is therefore the victim of misleading and self-seeking demagogues.

As in the past when music was part of the life of the primitive man, like eating, drinking making love and making war, music today still expresses the African's likes and hates as well as his attitude to life generally. Admittedly he no longer sings of the hunt and the battle like his ancestors; for to him these things are no more; they belong to the past. On the contrary, he sings of the factories, of conditions in the factories. He sings of the trains that take him away from home and children at dawn and return him after dusk. He sings of the pass laws, the pick-up vans and the eternal police raids on his home and sanctuary.

Listen to the chant of a gang of railway workers any morning as they heave a section of rail:

*"Where is Lizzie, we drink at Lizzie's we drink at Lizzie's  
The Dutchman's beard, the Dutchman's beard, the Dutchman's  
White men goddam, white man goddam, goddam, goddam,  
Where is Lizzie, we drink at Lizzie's, we drink at Lizzie's."*

Watching this little drama that is enacted daily at a thousand and one places wherever there is a group of Africa's dusky sons doing heavy manual work, the uninitiated spectator feels, "Hm—, here are people who are able to treat their troubles lightly and sing them away." How often does one hear this opinion expressed? Even the white foreman is deceived, little understanding that at that moment he is personally being made the embodiment and symbol of all that is vicious and evil in the white man. His beard — whether he has one or not is immaterial — is the object of ridicule, and as a white man he must be "Goddammed."

The emotional attitude hereby displayed stands out in marked contrast to the fatalism and defeatism of, say, forty years ago when it was not uncommon to hear a choir of Africans sing with gusto and nonchalance "From North and South, East and West, white and black, rich and poor, we are under the British kingdom for ever more." While it is not easy to pinpoint the date or year in which the divorce of the new attitude from the old took place, it is nevertheless possible to state that it was somewhere about the early twenties of the present or thereabouts, for it was at this period that we hear Majombozi sing — this was his own wording to a familiar English song (translated from Xhosa):

*"Whilst we lived we lived at ease,  
The white man came and ended us peace;  
In his hand he held a bible,  
And under his arm he hid a rifle.  
Whilst we took his hand and the bible,  
In his heart there lurked guile.  
We accepted the bible and his hand,  
Today we are creatures without land."*

This expression of revulsion at the oppressor's yoke was, however, not isolated. It was not a manifestation of Majombozi's "warped soul" — lest the reader should think so — it was an expression a general awakening and of an awareness on the part of the Africans as a whole although it was still possible at this time to hear some choir sing "God bless the Prince of Wales." Even today in the year 1954 A.D. we still hear Hamilton Masiza sing:

*"Behold! Behold! Behold! thou black races,  
Hearken! for we bring you tidings good,  
That will put you in happier mood,  
Look! the Queen of Britain good,  
Has visited her subjects the black races."*

Among the many composers at this time who expressed the feeling and attitude of the day, was Reuben Caluza who for almost three decades dominated the African musicians and carved for himself a place of honour from which he is not likely to be overthrown easily. I make bold to say that, in the whole sub-continent of South Africa, no man sensed the feelings of the people more and no man interpreted them more aptly. Caluza was first and foremost a friend of the proletariat. In fact, he was one of them. He was their friend because he was their spokesman through his songs. He was

one of them because he felt with them and wept with them. Can anything demonstrate this more aptly than the following:

*"There is a great calamity, my fellowmen,  
It has befallen all the black men;  
From work the whites dismiss us,  
In our place they employ their brothers.  
For many years we served them,  
We were so true and trusted.  
Yet, and ~~we~~ the white men,  
They chase us from employment;  
They've chased them at Tekwini (Durban),  
They've chased them in the Goldfields;  
And now they will arrest us,  
What shall we do, pray tell us."*

Throughout all Caluza's music, one is able to discern this invariable attitude of self-identification with the masses. At one time he is following the pick-up van as it ~~carries~~ *carries* in the townships stopping all and sundry and asking "*Waar's jou pas, jong?*" At the next moment his receptive mind is contemplating the misery which was caused by the notorious Land Act of 1913. An adept at taking in situations and weaving them into the matrix of his music, Caluza had a very high sense of humour. He was able to take the most serious situation and make it look ridiculous. In the "Pick-up Van," he makes even the policeman loathe himself.

I have given pride of place to Caluza, and not without justification, for he marked the beginning of an epoch, and up to the present he stands peerless among the composers of the country as a man of the people. But the era he ushered in has not come to an end. On the contrary, after an interregnum which lasted for a few years, perhaps because the struggle for the overthrow of the oppressor was experiencing a setback which was reflected in barrenness of music of the people, a revival has begun. It is too early at present to attempt an appraisal of the contribution which the present phase of the struggle is likely to make, but it is clear that since the present phase of the struggle started, the initiative has been wrested from the intellectuals and the song of the people is welling up spontaneously from many sources and bubbling up in a manner unknown before. The people are expressing their emotion in song more than ever, as a visit to any Congress meeting will show. The new folk song is expressing their aspiration and their revolution against domination by the oppressor.