

# The Life of a South African Tribe

BY

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OF THE

*Swiss Romanic Mission*

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## II. MENTAL LIFE



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## C. UTENSILS.

Nature, which has provided the Ba-Ronga with skins of animals for clothing, and with poles, reeds, grasses and fibrous barks for their habitations, has also favoured them with several exceedingly useful trees of which they have not been slow to take advantage. Of these the most valuable is the *milala* palm, (*Hyphaene crinita*) used for nearly all basket-work; next comes the *nkuhlu* (*Trichilia emetica*) whose wood is particularly serviceable for all descriptions of carving. She has also deposited in their plains beds of clay, of more or less desirable quality, which they use for making pottery. I shall begin with the latter.

## 1. Pottery.

An excellent clay is to be found at Shibindji, in the neighbourhood of Lourenço Marques, a district close to Morakwen, and the people of this place — they are the same who abstain from eating any animal liver (I, p. 364) — are the potters who supply the whole country. They are said to be the masters (*benyi*) of the art. But clay is found in many other places, in Shifukundju, Mpatshiki, etc. It is said that the clay of Muweri, near Lemon Island, on the Lower Nkomati, is even better than that of Shibindji. So the art of the potter does not belong to a single family, and is not hereditary. Any one may learn it and practise it. Pottery amongst the Thongas is essentially woman's province. Is this because earthenware utensils are principally used in the kitchen, where woman's sway is paramount and undisputed? Possibly; in any case it is so.

Let us suppose then that the mother of a family wishes to renew, or to add to her stocks of pots, large and small. She starts out for the marshes, picks up in the well-known hollow several clods of clay and returns to the village carrying them on her head. No one salutes her; everyone pretends not to see her,

doubtless to avoid bringing any ill luck to the venture! She buries the clay at the foot of a tree to keep it moist, and only takes it out of its hiding-place on the day on which she has decided to start the work.

Let us see by means of some photographs, taken by the greatly regretted A. Borel, how Meta, a Shibindji girl, married in Rikatla, proceeds in her work. Placing a broken piece of an old pot in the



Fashioning the pots.

Phot. A. Borel.

mortar, she pounds it until it is reduced to small fragments, the size of a grain of maize: these she mixes with her clay, adding water and sand, and kneads the whole together until she has made it into a very soft ball. She makes a hole in this, a wide opening which she enlarges by degrees, hollowing it out more and more and gradually giving it the shape she wishes. I have already alluded to the clever way in which the Blacks trace the circumference of a circle on the ground (I, p. 126); the same natural instinct enables them to model perfect spheres. It is astonishing to see the beautiful symmetry of these utensils, although these pots are fashioned without the aid of a wheel or measuring instrument of any kind.



The jar, still soft and wet, is put on one side. Now is the time to decorate it with very simple designs, generally triangular, after which the industrious worker leaves it to dry for a few hours, taking care to cover the opening with a thin piece of wood to prevent the wind from spoiling the shape. As soon as she dares to lift it without danger, she turns it over, smooths the bottom (*tshaku*), which will harden in its turn, and places the



Constructing the furnace.

Phot. A. Borel.

pot in a hut where it continues to dry in the shade. On the day she chooses for the firing, she digs a hole in the sand, arranges the various pieces of pottery in it and covers them with a heap of small pieces of wood or with palm pith; this she sets alight, and keeps a quick clear fire burning until she considers the firing is finished, when she leaves her red and glowing utensils to cool down (*hola*). The cooling accomplished, she begins to inspect the result of her work. This is the psychological moment! How many have cracked, how many have withstood the testing? The worthless ones are smashed, and the perfect ones reserved to be

painted a brilliant brown, which is done with a decoction of the bark of the mangrove (*nkapa*) and of the *nkanye*, boiled with a kind of creeper (*mahlehlwa*), which has a sticky sap. Such is the primitive method followed in the manufacture of all Native pottery.

The process of firing being often unsuccessful, taboos are plentiful in the manufacture. When women collect the clay,



The furnace ready.

Phot. A. Borel.

only one of them digs and gives it to the others; should each make haste to dig for herself, this would bring mishap: the pots would break. If no accident happens and the firing is successful, these women will say: "She who dug the other day has a lucky hand (a *ni boko dja hombe*). Let her dig again another time." When the clay has been hidden in the ground, at the foot of a tree, it is also taboo to tread on the spot, when walking through the village. When the heap of wood is ready, the potteress will call a little child, an innocent creature, to set fire to the furnace. She shows it where to place the glowing ember,



and, if the result of the firing is good, she will always call the same child on future occasions (1).

If all these precautions prove useless, and the woman sees that she is not succeeding, she will go so far as to consult the bones, and, if they so order, she will make an offering to her gods, gods of the father, gods of the mother, or possessing gods (Part VI), if she is a spirit-possessed woman, as the bones may



Result of the firing.

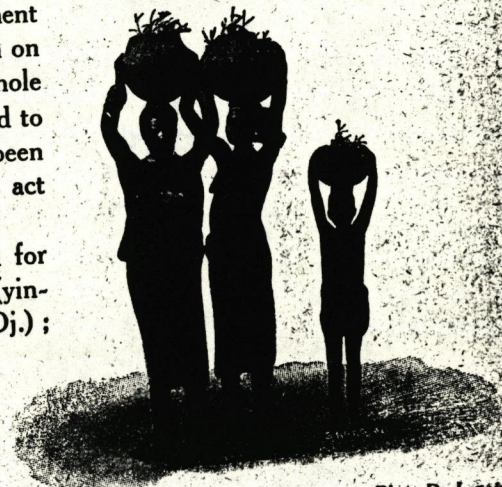
Phot. A. Borel.

declare. People will say to her: "You manufacture pots and sell them and do not give anything to your gods: that will not do!" So she will offer a piece of clothing, a coin, etc., at the altar (*gandjelo*).

(1) Meta, the Rikala potteress has entirely given up the manufacture of pottery of late years. All her pots cracked, because, she said, she was the only woman practising this art in the country. In her former home, everybody made pots and in this way the potteresses "strengthened each other (*tiyisana*)."<sup>1</sup> Moreover when a pot was heard cracking in the furnace, somebody ran to the hut and collected a little of the dust on the floor and threw it into the other pots, and this prevented them from being spoiled. It was too far for Meta to run to her former home to get the dust—so she gave up her trade! The case of poor Meta is a good illustration of the collective character of industrial pursuits amongst primitive peoples.

Another taboo in connection with the making of a pot is this: when a pot has been fired, it must still be *tested*; this operation is called *ku khangula*, or *kwangula*, and is performed in the following way. A little water is poured into it, and the potteress washes it thoroughly; then some grains of maize are cooked in it and thrown away. This is to remove the *nkwangu*, or *nkhangu*, viz., the danger attending the use of an untested, unpurified pot: people using such an implement would suffer from an eruption on the arms, and even on the whole body. To give any one food to eat from a pot which has not been *khangula* is looked on as an act of hatred.

The pot, or boiler, used for cooking is called *nhlambeto* (yin-tin, Ro.) or *mbita* (yin-tin Dj.); it has a very wide opening. Smaller boilers are also made, even quite diminutive ones called *shihlembetwana* or *shimbitana*. The beer jar (*khuwana*, *dji-ma*), illustrated on page 101,



Phot. D. Lenoh.

Pots used to draw water.

No. 13, is of the same size as the boiler, but can be easily recognised by its straighter neck. Enormous beer jars are sometimes manufactured, perfect amphoras (*hotjo*, yin-tin), but they rarely stand the firing and are therefore scarce and expensive, fetching as much as ten shillings each: they may be two feet high; the ordinary cooking pot does not cost more than sixpence. The porringers, or large plates, are called *mbenga* (*mu*, *-mi*; No. 12) (1).

Shibindji clay is also used for making very short *pipes* (*shipana*), prettily shaped, probably in imitation of the European cutty. Smoking does not seem to be an indigenous habit; in the interior

(1) No. 11, on page 101, shows a small vase modelled by a young Native girl, an invalid from Natal (Station of Inanda).



one rarely sees a Native with a pipe in his mouth, tobacco being almost exclusively used in the form of snuff. The only smokers in the country are the old women of Lourenço Marques, and the youthful dandies who try to imitate the Transvaal Boers!

Clay modelling is perhaps the art for which South Africans are best gifted. In all the tribes children amuse themselves by



A young Spelonken artist and his work. Phot. J. Dentan.

modelling oxen, human beings, wheels, even waggons, sometimes very cleverly. I knew a boy in Shiluvane who was a true artist and could copy anything he saw, for instance a white lady with her hat on (1). The accompanying plate shows one of these young artists, from Spelonken, with his handiwork.

(1) The same boy, without having received any special training, could cut out a frock, and used to make the dresses of all the brides of the congregation. He had a wonderful eye for form and would have made his mark, had he received a professional training. But he died from consumption contracted in the towns!

## II. Basket-work.

The milala palm, whose sap supplies the tipplers of Pessene with their famous busura (II. p. 42), is a very valuable tree to the Ba-Ronga, as it is of its leaves that the greater part of the baskets in use by this tribe are made. The basket-maker gathers the most perfect leaves. These are not like the mimale folioles, growing opposite one another on a central nerve. The *milala* (plur. of *nala*) are true palms, the leaves consisting of folioles from half an inch to an inch in width radiating from a common centre, which itself grows on the end of a long peduncle.

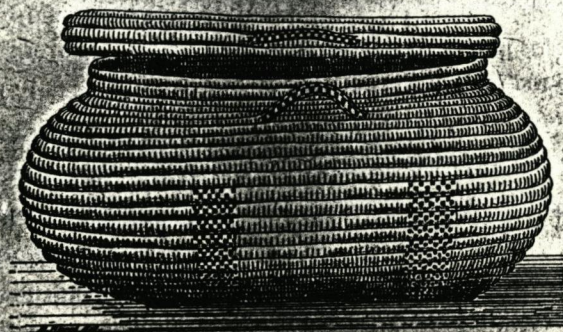
These trees are found in the woods of Mabota, Nondwane, Tembe, on the Coast, and in the low plains of the North Eastern Zoutpansberg, etc., sometimes in large numbers. Returning home, the workman (here we employ the masculine, basket-making being essentially man's work) spreads out the leaves in the sun to dry, having previously straightened the folioles somewhat, separating (*hangela*) them one from the other; when they dry, they turn a light grey colour with a shining polished surface, and are then hung up in the hut where they will be sheltered from the dew and ready for use. When the work is to be started, the folioles are torn (*phatlula*) from their peduncle, and, with a sharp pointed instrument, are split longitudinally into strips or straws of  $\frac{1}{8}$  or  $\frac{2}{8}$  of an inch wide, the ribs of the leaves (*nhlamalala*, *yin-tin*) being carefully kept; these delicate wands have their special use.

The Ronga basket makers are very fond of decorating their baskets with *designs in black*. These triangular and square patterns are produced by artistically plaiting dark and light coloured straws, and are not painted on after the baskets are manufactured. The straw is dyed black in the following manner: it is soaked in the black ooze (*ntjhaka*) of the marshes for two weeks, and then laid out to dry, which gives it a reddish-brownish colour. This hue is deepened by a second treatment. The leaves of a shrub called *mpsabutimu* are gathered and placed in a



pot with the red brown milala in alternate layers, until the utensil is full : water is then poured over them and the whole put on to boil ; very soon the straw becomes a brilliant black. The basket-maker has now only to pull up some of the grass growing in the hollow near the lake, dry it, and he is ready to commence work.

In the accompanying plates illustrations will be found of the principal specimens of this art, stereotyped shapes which have passed on from generation to generation, doubtless from

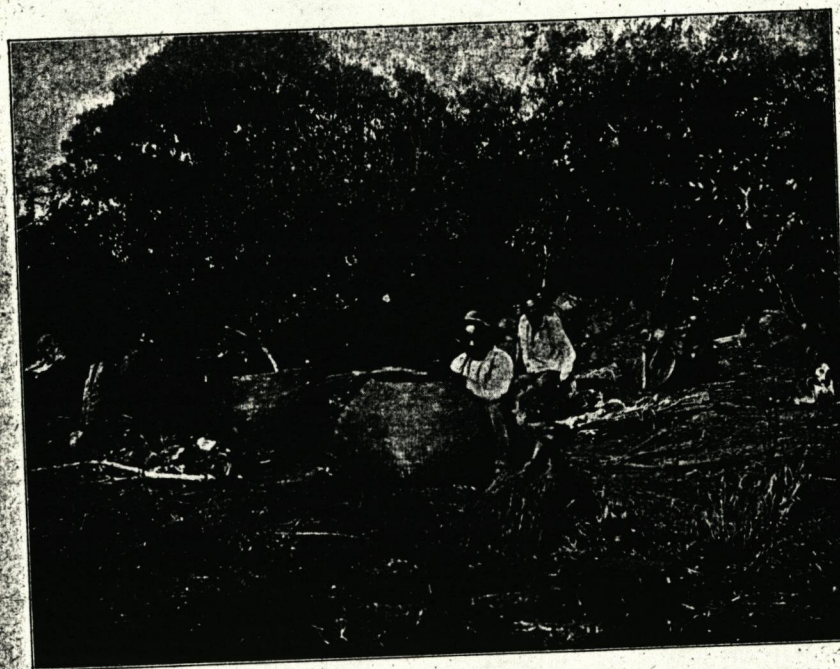


Ngula.

prehistoric times, and are called respectively : *ngula*, *hwama*, *shihundju*, *lihlelo* and *nhluto*.

The *ngula* (yin-tin) (p. 27) takes the place of honour, and is the most prized of all the Ronga baskets. It requires days or even weeks of continuous work to make one, but the result is worthy of the time and labour bestowed upon it ; I brought with me to Europe several *ngula* of various sizes. The particular one shown below, is oval and measures six feet two inches in circumference ; but there are many much larger, both spheroid and ovoid. This is how they make or, to use the technical Native term, "tlhaba" — "pierce" this basket. The workman takes his dried grass and plaits it, lengthening the plait according to requirements, as he goes along : this plait is bound round, and entirely hidden, by a special binding of palm leaf straw, thus forming a thickish cord of about half an inch in diameter ; the cord is soon doubled back upon itself, and forms a centre, around which

are fixed several concentric rings ; each inner ring is pierced with a kind of awl and the straw of the outer ring pushed into the hole, thus fixing them securely together. Hence the expression *tlhaba ngula*, to pierce a *ngula*. The bottom is soon finished, and differs but little in appearance from an ordinary straw-mat, such as



Manufacturing a *ngula* in Spelonken.

Phot. P. Rosset.

is used to prevent hot dishes spoiling the polish of the European dining table. The sides are made in the same manner by superposing rings of the straw cord, giving the basket a well rounded convex shape, after which two or three rings are superimposed perpendicularly, to form the opening, the mouth of the chef d'œuvre. The cover, made in the same way, must fit exactly over the mouth of the basket ; in fact it should require to be slightly forced over it : the fastening will then hold better. On the upper part of the basket, as also on the cover, the manufacturer has carefully plaited four handles, two corresponding pairs, those



on the basket pointing upward while those on the cover point downward, so that they meet. Two rings are also plaited, and passed round through each pair of handles, forming simple but solid hinges on which the cover can turn without ever being separated from the basket, of which it is henceforward an integral part. A well-made *ngula* is absolutely impermeable, and not the smallest hole can be found in it. I think it would even hold water. Such a basket is surely a work of art!

The *ngula* is the Native's Savings Bank. In it he keeps all his riches, the best grains of maize, or the best grown monkey nuts, reserved for seed at the next rainy season; also the material with which the women will deck themselves on grand occasions, etc. The enormous basket reposes at the far end of the hut, on a low table (*buhiri*) specially designed for the purpose. The *ngula* of the northern clans, where palm leaves are not to be found, is more rounded and the palm straw replaced by solid dry grass. (See the adjoining illustration, p. 121.)

While the *ngula* is enthroned in the hut, and is never moved out of it, the *hwama* (yin-tin, Ro.) or *funeko* (Dj.) (p. 124 No. 4 and 6), on the contrary, is the wallet of the traveller. It is a square bag made of plaited palm straw. The cover is about as large as the bag itself and, so that it may not be lost (which might easily happen while travelling), it is secured by the string used as a shoulder strap to carry the *hwama*, this being passed through it. The bag can thus be opened by sliding the cover right along the string, but it cannot be entirely separated from it. These bags are of different sizes, some more ornamental than others. A round variety is also made by a certain basket-maker of Masana. He makes three or four projecting horns to his *hwama*, which then takes a cylindrical shape, and has the advantage of being able to stand upright when placed on the ground. This bag or basket, is called *shiraba* or *baki* (No. 2); it is the kind used by the magicians for carrying their medicines, and bones.

The third classic shape of Ronga basket-ware (No. 3) is the *shihundju* (Ro.) *shirundju* (Dj.), the conical basket employed by the women for transporting maize, clay and manure. (It is by no means certain that the *shihundju* is cleaned out between

these several loads!) It is made in much the same way as the roof of a hut, point downwards, ribs of folioles taking the place of sticks. This basket may be said to be the special property of the women (1): they are very clever at balancing it on their heads; it is very rarely that a woman, old or young, lets her *shihundju* fall. When empty it is turned upside down and serves as a hat. It is a really pretty sight to see the young girls starting out for the fields with their conical baskets standing straight up on their fuzzy locks. When they are travelling and arrive at a friendly village, they hold themselves perfectly upright, shooting glances here and there without stooping or turning their heads, till their friends rush out to meet them, seize their *shihundju* and place them on the ground, in small holes which they hastily make in the sand. This is the first duty of hospitality amongst women!

The *lihlelo* (No. 8) is used by cooks for winnowing the maize. Palm leaves not being sufficiently strong for this purpose, the *lihlelo* is made of the roots, of a tree called *nukanhlelo* (a kind of mimosa), cut into strips, and is coated with a reddish brown varnish prepared from mangrove bark. It is the *lihlelo*, or rather a smaller basket of the same sort called *ndjewane*, that the housewife takes with her when picking the small wild cucumbers, or gathering the various herbs which serve for the supplementary noontide luncheon.

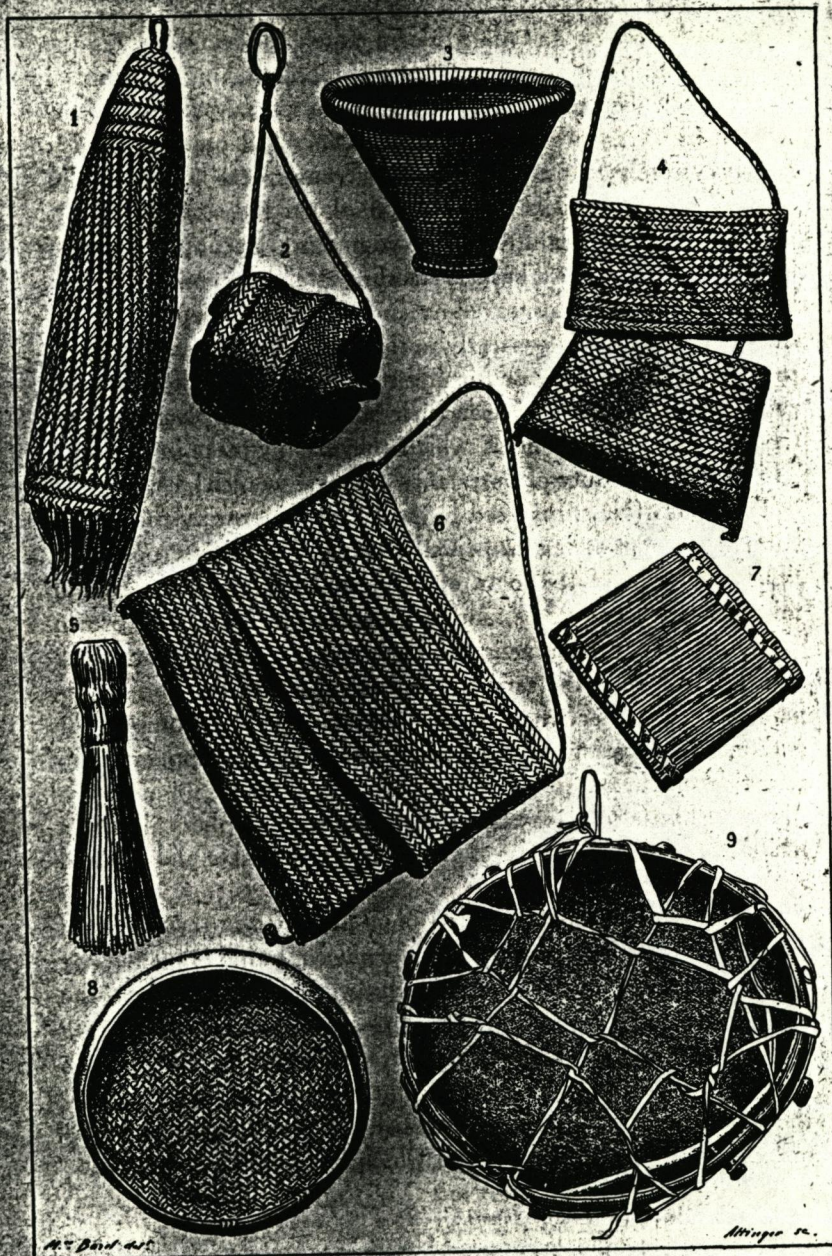
In the northern clans one often meets with a spherical basket made of the same material as the winnowing basket and covered with an ordinary *lihlelo*.

Besides the foregoing, the Ba-Ronga have two or three baskets which are not in such general use: the *nhlaba*, a kind of plaited bag with interstices between the palm straws, for carrying fish, the *ntjaba*, etc.

Another article, which might, at first sight, be taken for a basket, but which serves quite a different purpose, is the *nhluto*, the strainer. (No. 1.) This unusually shaped strainer is a sort of long bag of plaited straw into which is poured the beer made

(1) The male members of the family are called "ba matlhari, those of the assagai" and the female "ba-shihundju, those of the basket," as these objects are characteristic of each sex.

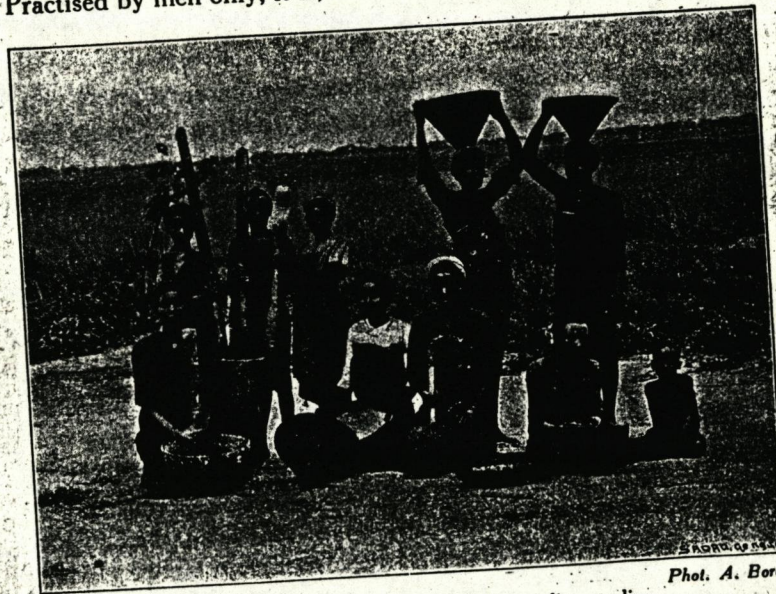




Thonga basket work.  
(One sixth of the natural size.)

from maize : the particles floating in this liquor are caught by the straws overlapping the top, or accumulate at the bottom, whilst the liquid filters through the interstices of the plait. The thick sediment remaining in the strainer can then be squeezed so as to extract all the beer. This straining and squeezing has the effect of rendering the drink much more alcoholic (p. 40).

The art of basket-making is by no means commonplace. Practised by men only, it is, in certain families, in certain villages,



Phot. A. Borel.

Carrying liblelo baskets, grinding and pounding mealies.

handed down from father to son. Children with a natural taste for this sort of work are initiated into its mysteries by their parents. But no young man is ever forced to take up the profession of a basket-maker. His heart (mbilu) must be in it! Amongst primitive peoples art, and even industry, always remains a matter of individual genius. It never becomes a mechanical output, as is the case in the factories of the civilised world : for this reason it retains a character of individuality, sincerity and natural beauty, not always to be met with in the products of XXth century European industry!



In the environs of Lourenço Marques, in our sub-station of Masana, lived the family of Tumbene, famous for its ngula. One of the sons inherited the father's talent. He was an evangelist in our Mission, and, when he was but a lad, people came to him from far and wide, to have their old baskets or broken lihlelo repaired.

Although basket-making is confined to certain families who more or less monopolise the business, without, however, preventing any one from practising the art, the manufacture of *straw mats*, or matting (*likuku*, li-tin (Ro.), *rikuku* (Dj.), is very wide-spread. Many men know how to "tlhaba likuku" — "pierce a mat." For this the Ba-Ronga collect a quantity of solid rushes of at least 3 feet in length, (myriads of them grow in the plains), and pierce holes through them, all along the rush, at intervals of 3 inches, passing strings through the holes. A net-work of string, half an inch wide, is run down the two sides at the edges to prevent fraying. When new, these mats are of a beautiful golden yellow; but the smoke in the huts soon turns them brown. Every Native possesses his own mat, on which he sleeps rolled up in his rug. Women possess two, an old one, used during menstruation, and a better one on which they usually sleep (I. p. 187).

The *string* (ngoti, yin-tin) used for these mats is made as follows: the leaves of the nala palm are picked when very young and tender (nshunya): a knife is passed all along the folioles, in order to remove the green fleshy covering; the parenchyma, composed of very light but tough fibres, (nkwampa), then remains. The workman takes two small bundles of these fibres and rolls them (yahliya) together with the palm of his hand along his thigh, twisting, intertwining, firmly uniting them, continually adding fresh fibres as he goes along: in this way he can make a string as long and as thick as he likes.

The following are the technical expressions employed for different kinds of basket-work.

*Luka* (plaiting) for ntjaba, shihundju, lihlelo, ndjewana, hwama nhalaba, tjala (drying floor), shitlanta (store house).

*Tlhaba* (piercing) for ngula and likuku.

*Betsha* (tying) for the small brooms also made of palm straws (mpsayelo, No. 5), and the reed walls (khumbi, dji-ma).

*Bangela* (making) for the *bumana*, a sort of hammock, made of plaited milala which is hung to the branches of the trees and sometimes in summer used for sleeping in, to escape the mosquitoes which swarm inside the huts.

*Runga* (sewing) for the boats (byatsho, dji-ma). The ancient Native boats built before the appearance of nails, hammers and saws, were made of pieces of wood securely tied together. Some of these antiquated-craft are still to be seen on the Maputju river.

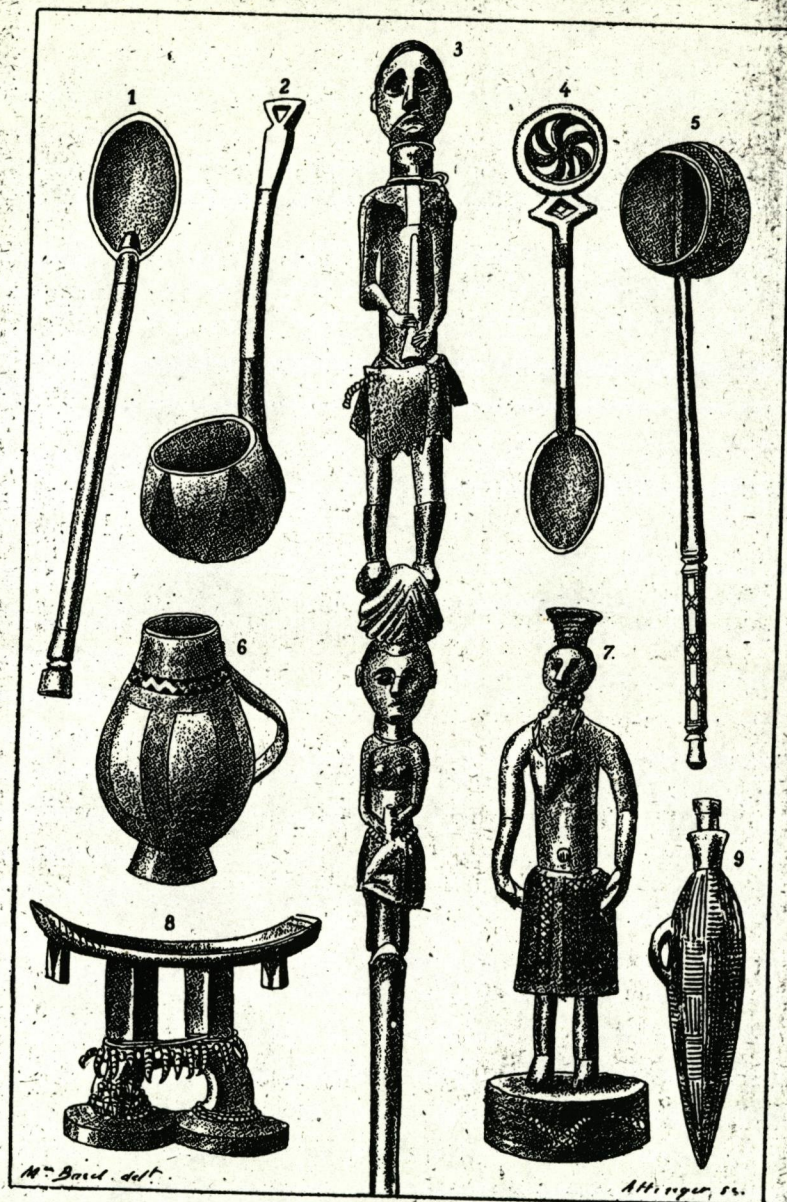
On the rivers up country, boats are frequently made of a large piece of curved bark, bent on both sides, which will hold two or three persons. I crossed the great Letaba in a boat of this description. Such boats are also used for storing water. Where mimale branches (or nervules) are procurable, they are tied together so as to form a raft called *shikhakhafu*. These are used on the Nkomati River, and on the lakes in Ronga territory. Big rafts made of trunks of trees fastened together, and called *magudhlwana*, were used in former times on the sea, when going to meet the White men, the Ba-Godji. (See later.) They are now no longer used and there is scarcely one to be found. In the neighbourhood of Lourenço Marques the Natives now build their boats on the European model. The fishermen cut down forked branches, which serve as ribs, to which they nail planks. They are wonderfully clever at this work; one man, Sam Matlombe, nicknamed the "King of the Bay," was particularly expert at it.

The sewn boats of olden times might well be included under the heading of basket-ware. Those of to-day belong definitely to another branch of industry, and will afford us a natural point of transition from basket work to wooden articles.

### III. Wood-carving.

It is the *nkuhlu*, mafureira tree, *Trichilia emetica*, as we have already seen, that is used by the Natives of these parts for their wood-carving. If the name of this tree is very hard to pronounce, its wood is, to an equal degree, soft and possesses the great

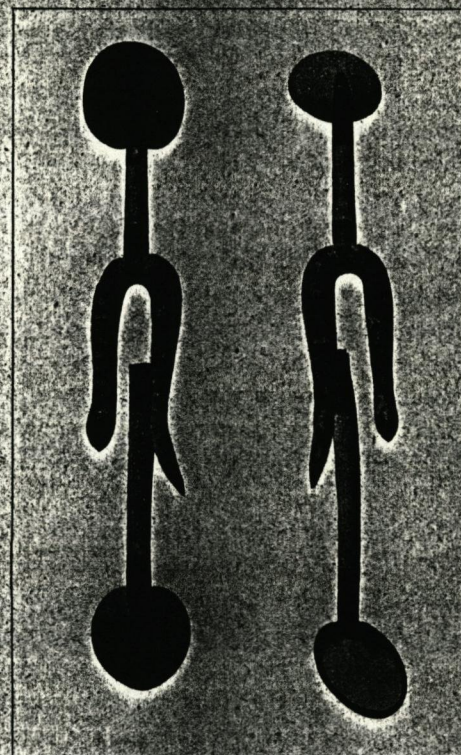




Thonga carvings.  
(One seventh of the natural size.)

advantage of not easily splitting or cracking when being dried. If Nature had not bestowed on the Thongas this excellent tree, who knows if they would have ever thought of executing the works of art which are depicted in the accompanying illustration!

However before thinking of art, they began by cutting, or fashioning, with their small knives, articles of every day use: *spoons* (nkombe, mu mi) for instance, (see illustrations of carvings, No. 1), made in several sizes; the big one is used for serving out the potful of maize amongst the rightful claimants, and the small one for conveying food to the mouth when the hands are ritually soiled (I. p. 193). One often finds really well carved spoons. I give drawings of two which are particularly interesting; the first shows a sort of spiral, or catherine-wheel decoration at the top of the handle (No. 4); the other, brought by Dr. Audeoud from the Maputju country, has a carved snake as an ornamental motive. Spoons are all ornamented, even the plainest, with designs in black, burnt into the wood with a red-hot iron. For beer, ladles are used, made of a single piece of wood; these are generally decorated with large black triangles (No. 2). In Inhambane and Quelimane, the Natives make them of cocoa nut



Carved spoon from Maputju country.



shells, on which they carve curious geometrical figures (No. 5). *Goblets* (ntcheko, mu-mi) are generally made with a handle. (No. 6).

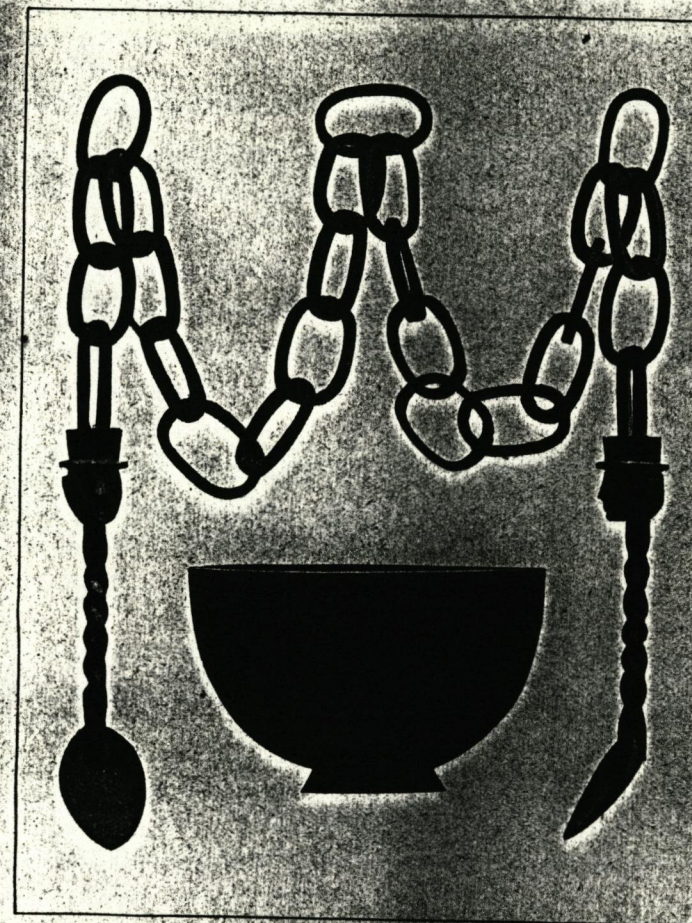
In the accompanying plate, (p. 131), two spoons are seen hanging to a *chain* made of links carved from nkuhlu wood. This is a wonderful product of Native art. These chains are often met with, especially in the Northern clans, some with links of six inches in length, the whole attaining to a length of many yards. The one here shown is six feet long, with links of only three inches. The special point to be noted in this "objet d'art" is that it has been carved from a single piece of wood and the artist had to make no mistake from the very beginning; a single slip of the knife would have broken the whole chain and made it useless. European joiners told me they doubted whether an ordinary workman would be able to carve such a chain. I was told that these spoon-chains were used by two individuals who wished to form an alliance; they passed the chain over their shoulders and, so united, ate from the same plate. This, however, is mere play and has no ritual value.

Between the two spoons, a kind of *bowl* is seen, almost perfectly round and prettily decorated. It was used by a man who had been possessed, and who washed his face in it every day to cool his head and appease the spirits. Thongas also carve large dishes, sometimes prettily decorated, though not so attractive as those of the Ba-Rotse of the Zambezi. I possess one of two feet in length by 10 inches in width. These are used for serving meat.

I must not forget the *mortars* (tshuri, dji-ma) usually made of mahogany, or of nkanye, and the pestles (musi, mu-mi) made of nkonono. The former are often adorned with triangular carvings.

The same style of decoration is to be seen on the *calabashes* which Natives use as bottles. The calabash, as every one knows, is a sort of gourd composed of two spheres of unequal size with a narrow connection between them. By an ingenious system of supports, placed under the gourd during its growth, Natives succeed in imparting to the upper sphere the shape of an elongated neck. There are many varieties of calabash, some small, furnished

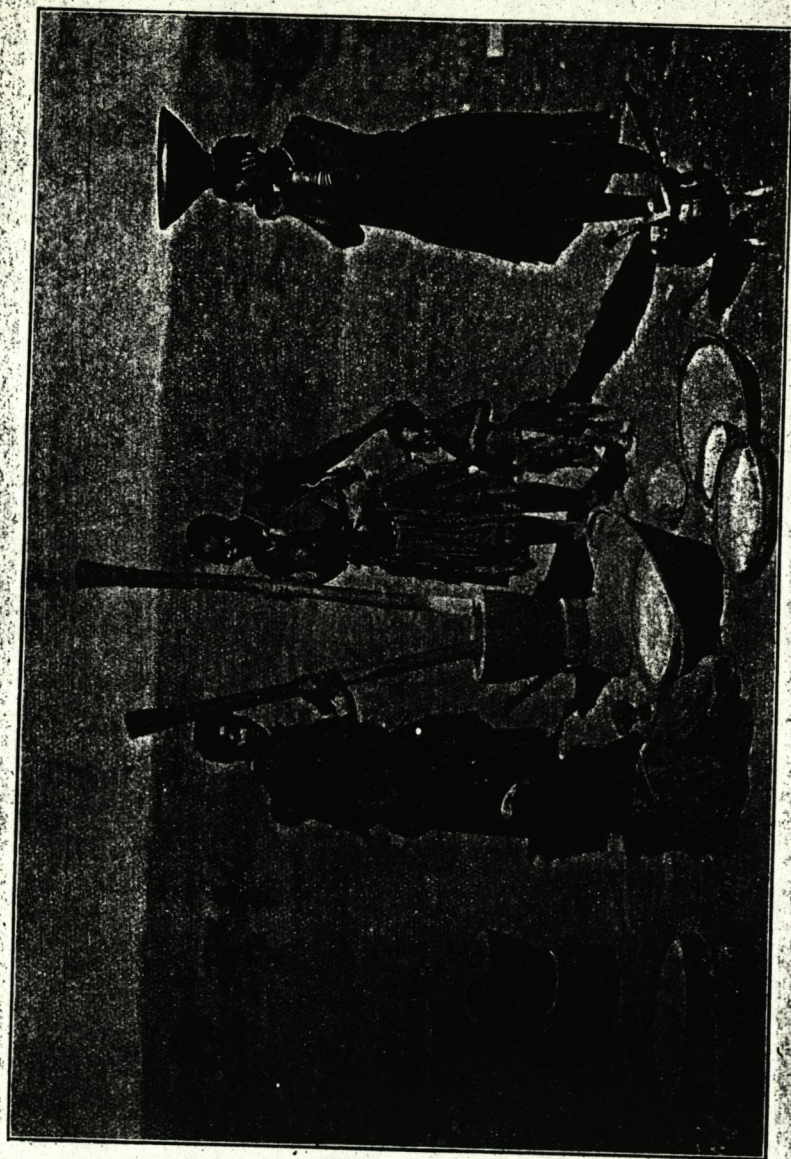
with a long projection and used for drawing the bukanye from the large jars. They are specially kept for this purpose! (See p. 101, No. 7, and also I, p. 400). In Vol. I, p. 50, I have given an



Carved chain and bowl, (Neighbourhood of Lourenço Marques).  
(One fifth of the natural size.)

illustration of these bukanye calabashes, called *ntjeko* (mu-mi), very prettily decorated by a Tembe artist. The black designs are burnt in and represent huts, birds, palm trees and, last but not least, two warriors fighting! The white dots are beads inserted





Thonga kitchen ware.

Phot. H. Gray

in the soft bark of the calabash. The largest calabash on this plate measures 21 inches in length and 7 in width.

Some plainer calabashes are Nos. 8 and 9 of the illustration of ornaments. Others are simply shells of sala (shikutja), (p. 16), with a good-sized hole cut in them for an opening (Nos. 6 and 10); a circular piece, say one third the size of the other, makes a capital cover; a string passes through the bottom of the calabash and the middle of the cover, fastening the two together. When this is knotted on top of the latter the *lard tin* is securely closed. This kind of calabash is generally thus designated, for it is in these round balls that the *matureira* grease is kept, to which I have previously referred (p. 18). They are hung up in the roof of the hut where they swing to and fro in the smoke and become well browned. The young folks amuse themselves by carving designs on these shells.

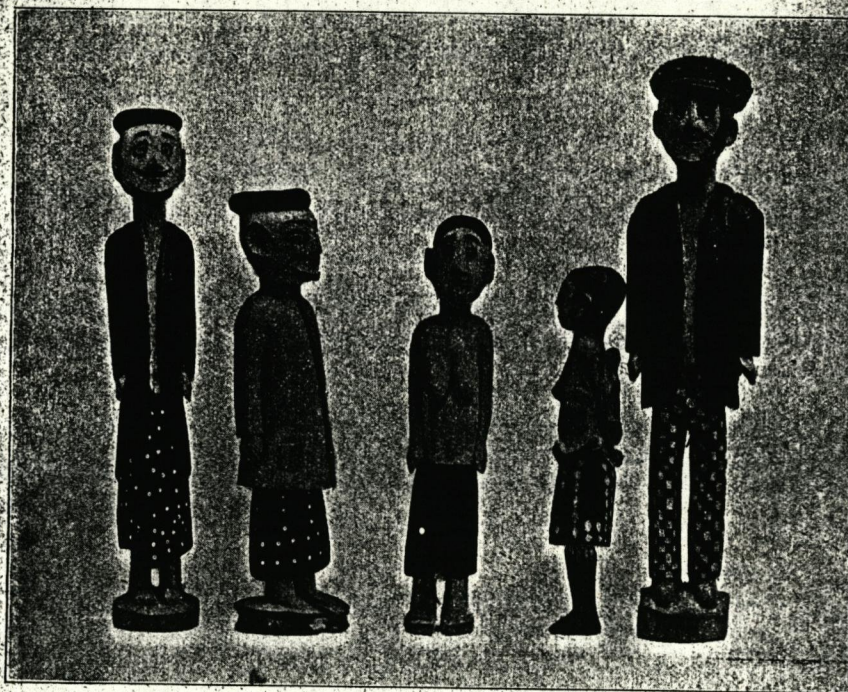
The artistic element is still more striking in the *snuff boxes* (ngulana, yin-tin), carved in ebony, which the chiefs are fond of carrying; the one depicted (p. 128, No. 9) came to me from Mavabaze who was, for a time, chief of the Khosa clan. It is also conspicuous in the strange *pillows* (shidamu) on which the Ba-Ronga rest their heads at night. Let us contemplate this article (No. 8) with the respect it deserves! It is probably on this description of pillow that primitive humanity in all parts of the world has dreamed its dreams! We see it sculptured on the Egyptian monuments, above or by the side of princely couches. We find also among the relics of the lake-dwellers stone objects of a similar shape, which were doubtless used for the same purpose. The Bantu has adhered to this piece of prehistoric furniture all



Mankhelu's stick.



through the ages. The specimen in the illustration was bought from a young man, a traveller, on the road ; the bird's claws, beads and other articles tied all round it, doubtless hunting trophies, are plainly to be seen. He had the advantage of literally

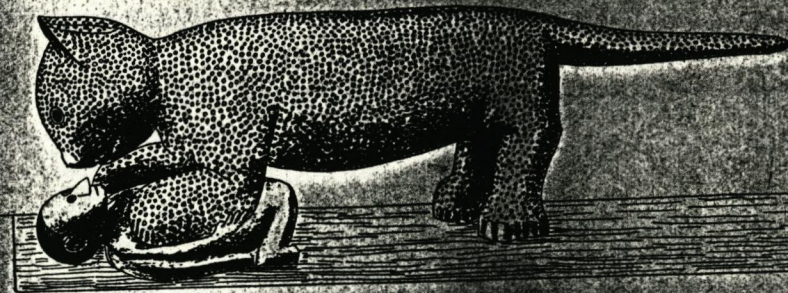


Thonga statuettes.  
(One third of the natural size.)

resting on his laurels, and naively believed they would bring him good luck while sleeping.

The Thonga artist has even dared to portray the *human form*, and the result of his audacity, however grotesque, is not without originality, and even a certain characteristic style, which may be recognised in all their statuettes. More often they content themselves with carving a man's head, with his crown, on the top of their walking sticks. I here give an illustration of Mankhelu's stick, which was a very old one, dating from 1850,

at least, and shows the primitive style without any European influence. Sometimes they carve the whole body from head to foot ; (as grapes do not grow in their country the use of the classic vine-leaf is quite unknown). No. 3 represents a stick with a man and a woman, the one standing on the other's head, the stronger sex treading the weaker under foot ! Large statuettes, of at least one and a half to two feet in height and broad in proportion, are to be seen in the Neuchâtel Ethnographical Museum, which without doubt contains the largest collection of Thonga implements in the world, having been plentifully provided with them by the mission-



A panther devouring an Englishman.  
(One twelfth of the natural size.)

aries of French Switzerland. No. 7 is smaller, and represents a woman having on her head the typical conical basket, the pride of the workers in the fields, and of the cooks. The five small figures on the accompanying plate are very amusing indeed. They were carved by an artist of Movumbi (near Rikalla), who asserted that the man on the right was a Banyan. The other figures are Natives, men with their wax crowns, and the ladula garment (p. 96) adorned with beads ; one is a woman carrying a child !

The finest specimen of Native art that I ever saw is the carving of a *huge panther* about to devour a human being, the work of Muhlati, a sculptor living in the neighbourhood of Lourenço Marques. This artist, who was very proud of his work, and asked a tolerably high price for it, claimed to be able to carve anything and everything : birds, four-footed beasts, or men. He was famous throughout the land for his talent. Nothing more quaint



could be imagined than this large spotted creature, (the spots being obtained as usual by burning with a hot iron), planting his claws in the flesh of a man, (an Englishman, I was told by the inspired author of this group!), and glaring at him with two great round eyes, not very symmetrical! With touching forethought, this modern Phidias has made the posterior half of the tail quite independent of the rest of the animal. A tenon and circular



Thonga canoe.

Phot. A. Borrl.

socket allow the caudal appendage to be so neatly adjusted that the joint is hardly visible! Muhlati told me how the idea of a removable tail had occurred to him. He thought that if ever his masterpiece had to be packed up and cross the ocean, it would thus be more easily cased. This can hardly be called the idea of a savage! Besides, the work itself would never have been accomplished had there been no Whites in the country. Evidently the sculptor, indolent like all his race, would not have worked day in and day out at carving such an animal as a play-thing for his children. He concluded that his talent might well bring him in some money; it was mercenary considerations that urged him on to the execution of the work, and no mere love of art; nevertheless

I do not believe any foreign influence was exercised in the conception of the idea. His group is absolutely original, and, as such, shows us to what lengths the sculptural talent of the Ba-Ronga can go. This group is now in the Neuchâtel Museum.

While statuettes are the most elaborate products of Native sculpture, *canoes* (shene (Dj.)) are the largest. I have already mentioned the taboos connected with the cutting of the mahogany and nkwenga trees when used for this purpose (p. 19). Other trees, the mpfubu and the muhlu, can be cut without these precautions being taken.

#### IV. Metallurgy

When and how did iron reach the Ba-Ronga? Probably we shall never be able to ascertain. Tradition has it that the primitive inhabitants of Nondwane, the Honwana, who cooked elephants in order to tear them in pieces, had no iron implements. Some authorities tell us that the hoe in use in olden times was of an exceedingly hard wood, wrenched I know not how from a species of teak tree called *ntjhiba*. The Natives of these parts must have passed directly from the age of wood to that of iron. There was certainly a stone age, comparable to that of the lake dwellers, in Cape Colony, where a great quantity of silex and of polished stones have been found. I never heard of any such implements having been used by the Thongas, nor found within their territory. As regards the bronze age, they have known the use of copper for a long time, but it cannot be proved that they knew it before iron.

Iron and other metals seem to have been first introduced in Delagoa Bay by the "Godji" traders and whale fishers, of whom I shall shortly speak; they are the first White visitors whom the Natives now remember. The Ba-Ronga used to exchange fowls and other domestic animals for hoes, brass bracelets, and copper brought by the strangers, and they had found out how to make copper wire by forging (fula) the pieces bought from the "Godji."



Later on wrecked boats provided Native smiths with iron to make hoes, axes, etc. In certain villages there were regular forges, (Mattharin, near Mbengelen Island, Matjolo etc.). The hoes were in the well-known form of an ace of spades and were fixed into a wooden handle, as are also the axes, and battle axes (I. p. 453). But the principal supply of iron came from the Transvaal Mountains, especially from the Northern Zoutpansberg, where the Bveshas have practised the art of mining iron ore for an unknown period. These Sutho hoes have played a great part in the history of the Thonga tribe, having been extensively used as currency for lobolo purposes.

These Bveshas — the word is said to be a Thonga corruption of Venda — built their furnaces in ant-hills, as shown in the accompanying illustration supplied by M. H. Gros, near Iron Mountain, East of the Spelonken district. They excavated three holes under the furnace, and blew into them by means of bellows made of a skin, the air being expelled through an antelope horn. The ore, broken in small pieces and mixed with charcoal, was smelted, crushed, smelted a second time, crushed again and made into hoes and axes, etc. Who had taught the Vendas this art? Did they learn it from the Ma-Lemba, that curious tribe, half Semitic in its customs, which invaded the Northern Transvaal during the XVIIIth century? Nobody knows for certain. I am under the impression that this art is older than that, as the Lebombo Natives, who invaded the Nondwane in the XVIth century, seem to have possessed iron weapons. The origin of iron and the date of its introduction into South Africa is still a mystery.

Among the ornaments illustrated will be found a very pretty belt (No. 1). It is the work of a young man named Philemon, living in the outskirts of Lourenço Marques, who employed his leisure moments in making objects of this description with twisted wires of iron, brass and copper, bent in festoons and fastened with small tongues of metal. European influence is doubtless very marked in these belts, but still they possess a certain cachet of their own. Amongst the Zulus as in our tribe, large cups of various descriptions, including egg-cups, are



Phel. H. Gros.

Native iron foundry in Zoutpansberg.



manufactured, and it is evident that, in this branch, Native art is capable of considerable development. Their method of fastening the blades of assagais to the handles with iron wire is also very ingenious. Sometimes they cover their ebony sticks from top to bottom with a delicate network of steel and brass wire. A Native expert in wire work once mended the stock of my sporting gun, which was broken, and made a wonderful job of it. This wire, so extensively used for bracelets, was formerly made by Native blacksmiths, but now they buy it at Lourenço Marques or from the Hindu traders.

#### D. COMMERCE.

Thongas have an inborn inclination for trade and have always been addicted to it. Before there was question of any currency, when hoes were not yet procurable, or the *ritlatla* bracelet brought by the Whites (I. p. 385), or the copper stick called *lirale* (1) melted by the Palaora Ba-Sutho, they knew how to buy (*shaba*) and to sell (*shabisa*), viz., to exchange their primitive produce. A mat was bartered for a fowl and the thrifty savage thought: "This is good business; the hen will lay eggs and hatch chickens and this will bring me a profit (*bindjula*)."<sup>1</sup> A shihundju basket was also exchanged for a hen. Another way of buying was adopted when dealing with pots; the pot was filled with mealies by the buyer and the contents left to the potter as corresponding to the value of the pot. For monkey-nuts, not husked, the pot had to be filled twice; for more precious products, such as sorghum and Kafir corn, half of it only was measured out. I have myself witnessed some transactions of this kind amongst the Nkunas. If the pot broke when first used, the potter had to give another in its place.

But this primitive trade became much more extensive when the Whites made their appearance. Delagoa Bay was one of the

(1) Compare my article in *Folklore*, 24 June 1903.

first spots visited and occupied by Europeans in South Africa, and a considerable Native trade developed there in the XVIth century, according to Portuguese documents. These Portuguese records show that, as far back as 1545, Lourenço Marques and Antonio Caldeira made a commercial exploration of the Bay and tried to establish regular exchanges with the Natives. These relations were not continuous, but in 1650 there were five factories in the vicinity of Delagoa, on the island of Inyak, at Sheffin, on the Nkomati (Manhisa) and on both sides of the Bay. In 1721 the Dutch settled there and remained for fourteen years. The Austrians also stationed a garrison on Inyak Island in 1781, but this stronghold was destroyed by a Portuguese frigate. Since the beginning of the XIXth century the Portuguese occupation has been more continuous. The only reason for Whites settling at Delagoa was, of course, the opportunity of traffic with the Natives, and the presence of foreigners doubtless stimulated a certain commercial development among the Ba-Ronga and the tribes of the interior. This is, at any rate, asserted by a Portuguese who visited Lourenço Marques at the end of the XVIIIth century, and wrote an account of his impressions to Don F. Amaro de San Thomé, Prelate of Mozambique. His description may appear somewhat highly coloured to those who know the localities, but I quote the following passages which bear upon our subject:

"On the Southern shore of the Bay resides King Capella (a surname bestowed by the Portuguese on the royal family of Tembe) who is now known as Antonio, (perhaps the Muhari of the Natives). He is very powerful, and has always with him a merchant who trades in ivory... To the North of the river is our factory, where we have a fort and as many as 170 soldiers. The King of Matolla (Matjolo) is very powerful, and well supplied with all necessities. His village consists of over 400 huts. (This probably means all the villages of the country collectively). It is here that the inhabitants of the mountains bring for sale gold and copper and ivory, for which they have to pay dues. This Monarch owns a province called Cherinda (Shirindja). He obtains from it quantities of ivory... I saw in the house of the King of Maouote (Mabota) two large chests full of amber. About thirty or forty days' journey up the river (Nkomati) dwells the