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The first use of the word 'anthropology' in English was recorded in 1593, but its modern use to indicate the study and science of humanity became current in the late nineteenth century. At that time a separate discipline had begun to evolve from many component strands (including history, archaeology, linguistics, biology and anatomy), and the study of so-called 'primitive' peoples was given impetus not only by the reports of individual explorers but also by the need of colonial powers to define and classify the unfamiliar populations which they governed. From the ethnographic writings of early explorers to the 1898 Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits, often regarded as the first truly 'anthropological' field research, these books provide eye-witness information on often vanished peoples and ways of life, as well as evidence for the development of a new scientific discipline.

The Ama-Xosa

Son of Tiyo Soga, the first black South African to be ordained, John Henderson Soga (1860–1941) was a Xhosa minister and scholar. Like his father, he was one of the first of his people to be educated in Europe and to marry a European woman. His perspective on his people's history and culture is therefore distinctive. Conscious of the effects of modernity on Xhosa traditions, he published this work of social anthropology in 1932 to record their way of life as distinct from other tribal communities in South Africa. Soga traces the historical development of their clan system and laws, while offering uniquely informed insights into their beliefs and practices, such as the function of witch doctors and the customs of circumcision, *lobola* or 'bride price', and polygamy. *The South-Eastern Bantu* (1930), Soga's earlier survey of three branches of the Bantu family, is also reissued in this series.

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Life and Customs

JOHN HENDERSON SOGA



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**THE AMA-XOSA :
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THE AMA-XOSA: LIFE AND CUSTOMS

BY
JOHN HENDERSON SOGA

AUTHOR OF
The South-Eastern Bantu,
etc.



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INTRODUCTION.

THE Ama-Xosa or Xosa tribe has been selected as the foundation for the following pages; other tribes may be touched upon as the exigency of the occasion demands. The writer is more familiar with the Ama-Xosa than he is with any other individual tribe of the Bantu, and is in various ways more intimately connected with them. There are, however, other reasons for this selection, which may be briefly stated here.

From the year 1750 when certain clans of Ama-Xosa, namely the Ama-Gwali, Ama-Ntinde and the Ama-Gqunukwebe, the most southerly outposts of the great Xosa tribe, reached the Fish River in what is now the Albany district, the whole country along the eastern sea-board between the Fish River and the Bashee River, was occupied by the Ama-Xosa until the year 1835. Roughly, that comprises the territory between longitude east 27 degrees to 29 degrees, and latitude south 32 to 34 degrees; approximately, by map measurements, about one hundred miles from north-east to south-west, and about the same distance inland, i.e. from south-east to north-west.

In the latter year Sir Benjamin D'Urban drove the Ama-Xosa out of the greater part of this territory, and confined them between the Kei River and the Bashee, thus reducing the country occupied by them to less than half of its former size. Naturally the congestion of the tribe within this restricted area is great and becoming increasingly so with the passage of time.

Beyond the eastern and north-western boundary of this area the country is occupied by other tribes of entirely different branches of the Bantu race. Several clans of the Ama-Xosa,

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such as the Ama-Ntinde, Ama-Ggqunukwebe and Ama-Mbalu have been allowed to remain in the Cis-Kei territory, between Alice and King William's Town districts, and the Ama-Ndlambe in the Idutywa district. The two great divisions, the Ama-Gcaleka and Ama-Rarabe or Gaika of the Ama-Xosa, who form the bulk of the tribe, are regarded by all the Native tribes between the southern border of Natal and Cape Colony as the premier tribe of South-East Africa. The many wars in which they have been engaged with the Colonists, and the invariable success attending their battles with neighbouring tribes, have made them both feared and respected far beyond their immediate surroundings.

Another important fact is that the Xosa language has a vitality all its own, and from the Fish River to the u-Mzimkulu is rapidly becoming adopted as the general medium of intercourse by all tribes within that area.

It would appear as if, ere long, the so-called Zulu language (which I believe to be really the original Aba-Mbo dialect) will be obliged to justify its existence or, as it is with the Aba-Mbo and Ama-Lala dialects south of the Natal border, give place to the isi-Xosa. This may be regarded as an assumption which is not justified, but time will tell. Meanwhile, we find the isi-Xosa displacing, in an ever widening circle all other kindred dialects. It has in the past century penetrated beyond the Bashee River, the north-eastern boundary of the Xosa tribe, right up to the confines of Natal, and on the other hand, there has been no corresponding movement southward of the Zulu language. The influence of the latter is circumscribed within the limits of the boundaries of Natal.

One peculiar feature of the isi-Xosa is that it is practically non-absorbent, incorporating only a word here and there in extremely limited numbers from neighbouring tribes, its purity being practically unaffected, so that it remains in the unadulterated

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form in which it was found when Europeans first came into the country.

Then again, if we consider the essentially Xosa custom of circumcision, we will notice its gradual extension to tribes that did not originally observe the custom. Not only have the Fingo tribes of Lala origin, and the Aba-Mbo living on the borders of Xosaland, adopted the custom, but tribes further afield, such as the Pondos and Pandomise, are falling under its influence.

All these things point to the special virility of the Ama-Xosa tribe, as they also do to the vitality of the Xosa language and customs.

Perhaps the principal reason which has determined the writer's choice of the Ama-Xosa as the foundation tribe for this work, is that its customs have remained unaffected by those of other tribes. The cause of this is simply that this tribe has never been conquered and made tributary by any other Bantu tribe. Almost every South-East African tribe has been broken directly by the Zulu Chief Tshaka or indirectly by the effects of his depredations, and has either joined its fortunes to some other in like case with itself, or has become tributary to a tribe still maintaining its independence. In either of these cases customs must inevitably undergo more or less of change.

My last book *The South-Eastern Bantu* was devoted to a historical survey of the three branches of the Bantu race inhabiting the territory between Natal and Cape Colony.

The present volume is divided into two main parts, the second having several sub-divisions within it.

Part I is a brief historical sketch of the ama-Xosa tribe. It seemed necessary to have this as an introduction to the rest of the book. This sketch has been written quite independently of that in *The South-Eastern Bantu*, though the ground covered must, of necessity, include matter common to both. The two sketches, however, differ considerably in form.

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Part II is devoted to the Customs and Life of the Xosa tribe.

Since customs and matters incidental to individual and tribal life are inextricably woven together into the fibre of national life, no clear-cut lines of division have been attempted in this work, no effort made to treat life and customs as independent of each other. Yet it is hoped that such arrangement of material as has been made will enable readers to form definite ideas on these interdependent subjects.

The life and customs described herein are still in evidence, but undoubtedly great changes are taking place politically, economically and socially through the influences of civilization. Politically control has passed to the European. He rules, imposes his laws and determines the destinies of the subject race. Christianity and education both exercise their share in effecting this change, and that more especially on the social life of the people. The Native economic system has been adversely affected by the entrance of civilization. With European control came the trader. He had a large and attractive display of the necessaries of life. These could be secured by the Native more quickly and at a less cost of labour and time, and though not so lasting as the ox or goat-skin kaross of the men, or the ox-skin skirt of the women, speedily came into favour. Gradually and yet rapidly Native articles of clothing and general handicraft were superseded by manufactured European substitutes. As a medium for *lobola* and barter cattle remain the Native's primary necessity, but with the introduction of money as a medium for commerce the consequent lowering of the value of the former has had its effect in helping to change the Native's original mode of life. In order to secure money he has to leave home for considerable periods and undertake work at such labour centres as Johannesburg, Kimberley, etc. The greater part of the unskilled labour of the country is carried on by him.

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The replacement of the authority of the chiefs by that of magistrates, the curtailment of the former's power and influence has made such changes in tribal life that the old forms can never again be recaptured in their entirety.

In closing this brief statement the writer would make grateful acknowledgment to the authorities of the Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, for a grant, which enabled him to pursue research work more fully than would have been otherwise possible, in the interests of the present work.

I would take this opportunity of expressing my indebtedness to the Rev. R. H. W. Shepherd, M.A, and Dr. Richard Ross, both of Lovedale ; H. E. Smale, Esq., of Umtata, and Mr. A. M. Duggan-Cronin, of Kimberley, for their generous permission to use their photographs to illustrate this volume.

J. H. SOGA.

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