

Collection #
P 0913

**KAFFIR BOY CHOIR GROUP PORTRAIT,
CA. 1900-1914**

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

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HISTORICAL SKETCH

In the early 1900s, the Kaffir Boy Choir of South Africa toured Indiana and other states to perform songs in African languages and in English. They performed at churches and at Chautauqua events throughout Indiana. The choir was under the direction of James H. Balmer and accompanied by pianist Elsie Clark. Balmer and Clark also spoke to audiences about Africa at these performances. The choir members were presented as uncivilized people who were trained and reformed by British missionaries.

Balmer, the son of the Reverend J. H. Balmer, of Blackpool, England, went to South Africa in 1892 as a missionary. Clark, the daughter of missionaries, was born and raised in South Africa.

Balmer brought South African choirs on tour in the United Kingdom in the 1890s; their audiences included Queen Victoria, members of Parliament, and Cecil Rhodes, the prime minister of British South Africa's Cape Colony. The performers during these early years included men, women, and boys. At least as early as 1893, they performed on tour in Canada and the United States. The purpose of the tour was to raise funds to build an industrial training school for St. Philip's Mission at Grahamstown (now known as Makhanda in the Eastern Cape province).

By 1898 Balmer and Clark were touring with only boys, usually five boys representing different ethnic groups. The boys sang soprano, contralto, and tenor, while Balmer sang bass.

An incident occurred in December 1900 when the Christian Endeavor Society of the Presbyterian Church in Huntington, Indiana, sued Balmer for \$50 for failing to show up with the choir for a performance. After an article about this appeared in *The Fort Wayne Sentinel*, Balmer submitted a rebuttal to the newspaper, explaining that they had missed the Huntington engagement due to a railway accident. A judge determined that Balmer was to pay \$15.

Note: *The Oxford English Dictionary* and other sources indicate that at some point the term "Kaffir" became derogatory. From the *OED*: "It is difficult to overstate the extent to which *Kaffir* is a word of great racial and political sensitivity in southern Africa today as a result of the offensive impact and derogatory intent of these later uses, but the fact that its usage is currently legally actionable as *crimen injuria* under South African law underlines its status as one of the most highly sensitive and potentially offensive words in the English-speaking world. For this reason, when people from southern Africa travel to parts of the world in which 'Kaffir' is not inseparably associated with racism, they can be shocked at its usage, even when it is used with a meaning that does not relate to southern Africa." In 2018, a white woman in South Africa was sentenced to three years in jail for calling Black police officers "kaffirs." She was the first person in that country to be jailed for that reason. Often referred to as "the K-word," it is derived from the Arabic word for non-believer and then was influenced by the Dutch-derived Afrikaans language. The term is associated especially with the era of apartheid (1948–1994).

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“Dusky Singers: A Sketch of the Kaffir Choir Now in the City.” *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Ohio), 23 September 1894, p. 1.

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“Good Talent is Procured: Union Lecture Course at Cambridge City, Has Many Features.” *The Evening Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 29 September 1905, p. 5.

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“Interesting Service in Second Church.” *Lafayette Evening Call* (IN), 19 November 1900, p. 5.

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“The Manager is Nabbed: Kaffir Boy Choir Company in Trouble.” *The Fort Wayne Sentinel*, 15 December 1900, p. 1.

“White Woman Becomes South Africa’s First Person Sent to Jail for Racism After Yelling Racial Slurs at Black Police Officers.” *Newsweek*, 30 March 2018 <https://www.newsweek.com/white-woman-becomes-south-africas-first-person-sent-jail-racism-after-yelling-865488> Accessed: 19 September 2025.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This group portrait is a mounted halftone reproduction of a photograph showing James H. Balmer, Elsie Clark, and five South African singers of the Kaffir Boy Choir. This was likely a publicity photo. The choir members' names are written on the back of the mount, along with their ethnic identities. One is listed as a "Bushman," a term that was applied to the San people. Two are listed as "Basuto," an outdated colonial-era spelling of what is now known as Basotho or Sotho. One is listed as a "Kafir," which possibly referred to someone of a Nguni ethnic group. The other is listed as a Zulu.

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Mounted halftone reproduction of a photographic group portrait showing James H. Balmer, Elsie Clark, and five South African singers of the Kaffir Boy Choir. Miss Clark and the boys are all dressed in traditional native South African clothing. The boys' names and ethnic identities are written on the back of the mount as follows:

"Bushman – Gert Brieda

Basuto – Mlien Mtsela

Kafir – Skelpat Mooiaca [?]

Zulu – Figo Soga

Basuto – Mtyelele [?]" [another copy of this found online adds the second name Mytyelele Mtsela: https://humanzoos.net/?page_id=3324]

[The handwriting is not very legible; the spelling of the names is the processor's best guess.]

CONTAINER

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