

Content Advisory

FW04487 - Music of !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, Africa

"The term "bushmen" in this album's title and descriptive notes has negative connotations, such as the stereotyping of people deemed "primitive." This stereotypical name for the San, the Indigenous people of Southern Africa, suggested their inferiority in relationship to the colonizers. The !Kung people are a distinct nation within an ethnolinguistic group often referred to as San, or Khoesan, whose ancestry can be traced to the first modern humans in Africa. Smithsonian Folkways does not condone the inherent racism of the above terms but has chosen to leave the album as published in its original state to serve as a historical document. However, we encourage the listener to learn more about how the !Kung prefer to be represented. Click <u>here</u> to learn more."

Anna Kate Cannon, 2021–22 Dumbarton Oaks Fellow at SFR, Samantha Parton, SFR 2022 Intern, and Dr. Lee Watkins, Director of the International Library of African Music, contributed to this statement.

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- Children's Song (thumb instrument, clapping and voices)
- Children's Song (thumb instrument, clapping and voices) Bamboo fiddle
- Bamboo fiddle
- Dance Music (thumb instrument, bamboo fiddle with clapping)
- Band 1: Thumb instrument (bamboo fiddle with pounding)
 - Thumb (played) metal instrument
 - Conversation
 - Conversation
 - Conversation with women singing
 - Women singing
 - (with clapping)
 - Women singing
 - (with clapping) Conversation
 - Men dancing around a fire
 - (women and men singing) Men dancing around a fire

 - (women and men singing)

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

G MUSIC OF KUNG BUSHMEN Recorded by John Phillipson / Edited by Moses Asch / Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4487

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The Music of !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, Africa Recorded by John Phillipson



Notes by John Phillipson

The Bushmen inhabiting the Kalahari Desert of Southern Africa are probably the oldest surviving inhabitants of Africa. They are short (5'-2'' to 5'-6''), have yellow skin, slanted eyes and pronounced cheek bones that give their faces a strange Mongolian aspect.

They are neither whites nor blacks.

Their origin is unknown and their history lost in the obscure past of the African continent. But there is little doubt that they are a people apart. From the steatopygia (abnormally large buttocks) of both sexes, to the Tablier Egyptien of the women and the qhwai-xkhwe (a state of constant semierection due to muscular peculiarities) of the men, to their eyes and teeth, their anatomy is unique.

Their language is equally unique. It is full of clicks and suction-stops, explosive ends and throaty gurgles, singing sounds and guttural noises a few of which have been transmitted to Bantu tribes of Southern Africa, such as !Xosa. These clicks occur constantly in the conversation, the Bushmen being able to talk both while inhaling as well as while exhaling. They are nomads and hunters that live off the semi-arid desert, gathering wild roots, berries, melons and honey and hunting rabbits and groundhogs, heartebess, springbok, wildebeest, gemsbok and the other animals of the Kalahari Desert using primitive bows and poisoned arrows.

The Bushmen are divided in three main tribes: the Haikoum, the Auen and the !Kung. (The exclamation mark is pronounced by rapidly withdrawing the curled tongue from the back of the palate while the lips are forming the letter O). From the Heikum Bushmen only a few still live in eastern Ovamboland, S.W. Africa. The Auen Bushmen live in Southern Kalahari but very few survive in independent communities. The largest group is !Kung, living in north, west and central Kalahari.

Until recently the Bushmen and their tongue had been only superficially studied by a few experts, mostly German. That was during the latter part of the 19th century but the subjects were few, usually young Bushmen held in captivity and of a tribe designated as Cape Bushmen, now totally extinct as a result of the continuous warfare between these and the invaders: the Bantus and the Europeans. Today extensive study is under way mainly by the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa and other interested institutions.

The group heard in this recording is a rather large band of primitive !Kung Bushmen accidentally met in Central Kalahari Desert at approximately 23º 30' east of Greenwich and a few minutes north of the Tropic of Capricorn. They lived on crushed berries, roasted roots and meat barely scorched over fire, and since it was dry season in a waterless desert, the Bushmen ate tasteless but juicy Tsama melons. (The beginning of the word Tsama is pronounced similarly to "tsk, tsk" expressing vague disapproval.) They made music on every occasion from morning to night, and the instrument most heard was the thumb piano, producing strange, watery sounds and haunting melodies that the Bushmen listen to in the same way many people listen to classical music - by immersing themselves into a light trance. It is noteworthy that all the musical sounds heard in Bands 1-4 were produced by one single thumb piano. There was no accompanying handclapping, footstomping, or dancing, but only a mood, a dreamy expression or the suggestion of a trance.

The thumb piano is a small instrument resembling closely a "Sanza" in East Africa. It is made out of an approximately square piece of wood $6'' \ge 6''$ and 1/4 to 1/2 inch thick. On this are fastened metal prongs so polished by usage that it was impossible to identify their origin. The prongs are permanently fastened on one end and free to vibrate on the other. They are of different lengths (2" to 5" approx.) and the cross section changes not only from prong to prong but between different parts of the same prong. The instrument looks uneven in construction, some prongs projecting more than others but in no recognizable systematic manner. Their number ranges from 8 to 11, but the number of instruments examined was small (6). These prongs are used to produce the majority of the sounds. A jingling, predominantly watery sound if achieved by irregularly splitting one of the metal prongs right down its middle to about one inch from the fixed end so that when struck it acts like an uneven, jagged tuning fork. This prong is usually situated at the extreme right and all the prongs are played exclusively with the two thumbs.

The wooden platform of the thumb piano rests freely on an echo chamber, in this case an old tin can probably picked up by the Bushmen when crossing the main north-south sandy track of Central Kalahari from Ghanzis to Kang and Lehututu. While playing with the thumbs the hands are pressing the edges of the wooden platform and the whole unit is made to rock on the echo chamber, producing the third distinct sound heard, the irregular beat. A fourth, rattling sound is produced by having hard brown berries strung together and hanging loosely over the edge of the platform sometimes hitting the tin underneath. This instrument was also used to accompany dancing and singing and it was apparently played by men only, unlike the second instrument used, a one-string bamboo fiddle that was played by both sexes.

The fiddle is made out of a curved piece of split bamboo approximately 21/2 feet long and a single cord usually made out of animal sinew. It is placed on the shoulder and at the end projecting above the shoulder is the echo chamber usually a battered can, a dried calabash or a short lived ostrich egg-shell. (A variation of this instrument played mostly by women uses the mouth of the person playing an echo chamber). The fiddle is played with a short bow of similar construction and the strokes are not across the cord but along it (up and down, so to speak, instead of from left to right.) To change the note the thumb is used, touching the cord and reducing its vibrating length.

Bushman music has not been extensively studied, notwithstanding the reputation of Bushmen as Southern Africa's ablest musicians, and the fact that they have probably been making music for many centuries.

From an article by John Phillipson in Maclean's, Canada's National Magazine February 10, 1962

...I loaded myself with a light tape-recorder that runs on dry batteries, two microphones and a few hours of recording tape; two l6-mm movie cameras, two tripods, light-meters and 2,000 feet of color film; a 35-mm. range-finder camera, another singlelens reflex and a twin-lens reflex; and various lenses and film. Then I packed a blanket to sleep on, but chiefly to cast some shade in a country where the only tree is the scrawny camel-thorn; some biltong (spiced meat dried in the sun), breadrusks and a can of water. On top of all this I had to carry some tobacco for the Bushmen, my photo and cine-logs to keep track of the work done, and a shooting script to remind me of the work that remained.

I had walked just over three miles, my arms aching as if they were going to drop off, when a little ahead I saw something move. A few more steps and I found myself in the middle of a Bushman camp, where life had come to a shocked standstill. I had actually come within fifty yards of the camp before I noticed it; that's how easy it was to miss. Later I found that most of the women were out gathering berries and had I missed the camp I might still have seen one of them.

The Bushmen's first reaction was neither fear nor aggressiveness, just a stunned silence. Presumably it was not every day that they came across a white man walking alone through the bush, loaded like a Mediterranean donkey. They kept looking in the direction from which I'd come, but gave up when I didn't share their interest. I unpacked the tobacco and, making out the oldest men in the group, offered them a good handful. They accepted it without a word and immediately lit a wooden pipe that they passed around just as they did, as I found out later, with everything else; they shared all material goods without the slightest hesitation. But the immediate recognition of tobacco meant that they had previously come in contact with Tswana natives at least. So, mustering all my courage, I uttered a few Tswana words of greeting that I had learned for the occasion. The men looked at the stonily, the children with evident curiosity, but from at least fifteen feet away. Obviously they had not been exposed long enough to learn Tswana. Up to that time they had not uttered a word and I knew I had to break the silence if I wanted to stay. The politician's timehonored technique of kissing babies might or might not have worked; the motives of an obvious bachelor going around kissing babies could easily come under close scrutiny. Besides I might have scared the babies. So turning suddenly on the children I made a horrible face, let out a violent shriek, and made a threatening step toward them. Watching them scatter like birds I broke out in honest laughter and almost rolled with it on the sand. It worked. The men caught my laughter, and after that there was no difficulty. I came and went as I pleased and by the time the women came back, the chatter was interminable.

They spoke softly in quiet tones and their voices were pleasant and well-modulated, even when animated. It may appear strange to write about the soft voices of people who use guttural and singing sounds, throaty gurgles and clicks, explosive ends and suction-stops... That first evening the Bushmen might have expected me to leave. But when the sun set and I made no effort to go a few men came over and brought untreated antelope skins which I presumed were to sleep on...

They made fire by rapidly twirling between their palms a pointed stick of hard wood in a notch in a stick of soft wood. A tiny particle of the soft stick would disengage itself and begin to burn because of the friction. They would then tip the burning splinter into a small bunch of dry grass and blow on it until a flame was produced. They did this so expertly that it usually took less than twenty seconds to light a fire. Another way, used mainly to light pipes was to strike a flint obliquely with a metal object, while holding the flint next to the tobacco end of the pipe. They would blow on the spark produced and inhale until the pipe was lit.

The next morning I woke before sunrise while most of the Bushmen were still asleep beside the extinguished fires. I walked around on the sand trying to warm myself because the night had been cool and the early morning even cooler. The camp was spread in a vague semicircle, each family by a thorn tree, the trunk of which was used as a base for a semispherical lean-to, quickly made of intertwined branches and grass. That was all there was to a Bushman's home. Each slept on the sand covered by his caross, which is a treated animal skin made into a formless garment that also serves as a cover. There were a few mortars and pestles made of wood and used to crush the berries that are the Bushman's basic staple, and a greater number of large ostrich eggs with small holes on one side stopped by tiny bits of grass, used as containers for water, whenever that was available. Apart from that, they seemed to own only a few digging sticks, a few bags made of skins and a few primitive bows with bamboo quivers full of arrows.

Soon the camp was awake and the little fires started burning again, the shivering Bushmen approaching them as closely as they could without getting scorched. The chatter and laughter started again. The sum came out and half an hour later I felt comfortable enough to start working. I unpacked my movie cameras and without bothering to load them with film I started shooting, silently observing their reactions.

At first they looked at me with curiosity, evidently expecting something to happen. It was obvious they had not the slightest idea of what I was doing. As the time passed nothing happened, and I kept pressing the release button without let-up, their curiosity wandered, returned to my camera for a few seconds, and then died. I was completely disregarded which was the greatest blessing a documentary filmmaker in Africa could wish for. Making documentary films in Africa is a rather difficult, tricky and sometimes delicate affair. My only difficulty was communication. I could never ask anyone to repeat an action for the sake of catching all its details, because there was simply no way of doing so. A few times I tried to get them to repeat the making of a fire by beginning to do it myself. The Bushmen, thinking I was trying to learn something, would help me with gusto and encouraging chatter but when I left the job to pick up my camere they thought I was satisfied with a modest degree of half-proficiency and good-naturedly dropped the whole thing. When immediately I began fire-making again, desperately trying to have them do it, I must have struck them as a man who couldn't make up his mind for they promptly left me to my own devices. But, notwithstanding the frustration of the moment, it was, by a long way, the easiest and most rewarding film I ever made. And in some ways it was one of the most instructive.

Later in the morning the Bushmen started their workday. The men who had not gone hunting sat down to continue the long process of turning skins into soft carosses. The skinning of the animals was done so expertly that the Bushmen rarely needed to scrape off fat left on the hide. Any scraping was mainly to even out the interior surface and to increase malleability. They poured the juice of a Tsama melon on the hairy side of the skin and began to rub vigorously with a rock that had been worn smooth by usage. The hair fell off and the skin became wet and soft. They then took the hide in their hands, anchored it with their toes, and began an endless pulling and crumpling. The crumpling continued until the hide was dry and suitably soft. It was then cut and sewn together with long, thin and extremely strong pieces of sinew taken from the dead animal.

Meanwhile, the women and the older girls started crushing the berries that they eat with every meal, or went out in small, chattering groups to find and fetch Tsama melons and roots. The berries were small, about the size of large oval peas and consisted of a thin, brown, dry skin and the stone. The taste was slightly sweet but there was hardly anything to eat.

The smallest children, with big distended bellies and sores on their heads, played endlessly around the extinguished fires, and the younger boys made themselves useful, but mostly to themselves. One of their favorite pastimes was catching birds. The efficiency of the operation was astounding. During one hour I saw three little boys catch more than twenty small birds, using a single snare.

Later in the day the heat became almost unbearable. The small dogs, used to keep large carnivores away from the camp, incessantly sought the shadow of standing humans. As noon approached the voices became fainter and finally stopped. The Bushmen were spread out on the sand before their trees and asleep. They did not come to life again until later in the afternoon when the most pleasant part of the day began. They gathered together slowly, walking gracefully, talking in crisp musical clicks. The groups became larger, the Bushmen sitting on the sand as if it were a luxurious carpet. They sat close together obviously getting satisfaction and sense of security from their nearness to one another. The thumb-piano was passed from one man to the other and always expertly played, and both men and women played another fiddle-like instrument made of split bamboo and a single chord. Women came and went as they pleased, joining whatever group they liked, laughing, joking, singing and smoking as much as the men. They would try to start a song, which almost always involved a great deal of yodeling, and, when failing to attract enough interested people, they would break out in fits of laughter.

There was obviously no chief among these Bushmen although old people seemed to be treated with special consideration. Young boys would sometimes crush the berries of the older people or play the thumb-piano nearby while the old ones held their heads in their hands or covered them with a caross to protect their badly infected eyes from the brightness of the desert.

Eating was a very simple affair that took place in mid-morning and mid-afternoon. Each family sat in the sand, protected by the shade of its lean-to, and crushed berries were distributed. They were eaten straight out of the cupped hands. Roots were roasted a little on the fire and so was meat, when the hunters had been lucky. Instead of water, which was simply not available in the dry season, everybody ate Tsama melons using the sharp ends of their two-foot digging sticks to cut the pieces. The exterior of the melon was left intact for use later as a container for berries...

...I went hunting, I never washed, never shaved and never grew tired of them. I ran out of water the third day, out of food the sixth and out of film the seventh. The lack of communication never bothered me after the third day. When I wanted to go hunting I went to Tsakwe the hunter, pointed to the sun and then very low toward the east to indicate the time, and planted an imaginary poisoned arrow in his belly. He rolled with faked misery on the same and burst with laughter. Very early the next morning a soft hand grasped my shoulder until I was awake, and off we went into the desert that Tsakwe knew like I have never known anything, with the passion for survival and the lifelong and single-minded devotion of the primitive hunter. We gathered and ate berries and wild roots and when we grew thirsty we looked for melons. And when one of these melons, instead of being tasteless in the centre and bitter under the skin, turned out to be a little sweet the day was somehow filled to the brin.

...(when I left they) followed me to the truck and ...helped me get free of the sand. I gave them all the tobacco I had, and instinctively I extended my right hand to shake their hands. They looked at my empty hand, and shock with laughter. There goes that joker again, they must have thought; this time he rewards our hospitality by giving us nothing. But it was a good joke, worth at least a laugh, so they laughed. So I left them like that -- laughing.

BIOGRAPHY

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John Phillipson is a young Canadian mining engineer, who has lived and worked in Africa. Mr. Phillipson is also a renowned motion picture documentary producer, who has "shot" a number of films in Africa soon to be released.

Additional FOLKWAYS/SCHOLASTIC Releases of Interest

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LC R-59-61 CB, NY 2-12" LPs-

4502AB. AFRICAN DRUMS. Drumming styles of the Watusi (Ruanda), Yoruba (Nigeria), Zingili (South Africa), more. Notes by Harold Courlander LC R-A-56-287 1-12" LP

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AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

For additional recordings from Pacific islands see our Complete Numerical Listing (pp. 25-36).

4439. TRIBAL MUSIC OF AUSTRALIA. Songs and chants of aborigines of Arnhem Land and Northern Australia.

1-12" LP-

4433. MAORI SONGS OF NEW ZEALAND. First documentary recording of Maori music: war songs, laments, chants, more. LC R-59-848 1—12" LP—

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EUROPE

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NY 1-12" LP-

4467. FOLK DANCES OF GREECE. Fourteen "shuffling" and "leaping" style dances from mainland and islands. Notes, music scores. LC R-A-57-82 V 1-12" LP-

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LITHO IN U.S.A.