Instrumental Music of the Kalahari San

A Kung San woman playing gourd drum. Photo by Megan Biese/Anthro Photo
A Kung San man playing a variant on the musical bow. Photo by Richard Lee/Anthro Photo
A Kung San woman playing metal plunaries. Photo by Marjorie Shostak/Anthro Photo

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE
SIDE 1
1. Gut pluriarc with 3 men's voices.
2. Metal pluriarc with one woman's voice.
4. Gut hunting bow with one man's voice.
5. Gut hunting bow with resonator and one man's voice.
6. Sitengena with one man's voice.

SIDE 2
1. Te bow with two women's voices.
2. Tin can bow solo.
3. Sitengena solo: "Rain Song."
4. Sitengena with one man's voice.
5. Gut pluriarc with one man's voice.
6. Metal pluriarc with one woman's voice.
7. Gut hunting bow with one man's voice.
This tape, of approximately one hour, is intended as an introduction to
the instrumental music of the !Kung San of northeastern Namibia (South West
Africa) and of northwestern Botswana. The earliest recordings represented here
date from the period 1951-55 when Nicholas England (Dean, California
Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California) accompanied the Marshall
family (Peabody Museum, Harvard University) to the northeastern region of
Namibia, to the isolated groups of !Kung following a traditional hunting and
gathering mode of subsistence. The subsequent recordings date from the period
1969-1972 and were collected by Marjorie Shostak and Megan Biesele (Department
of Anthropology, Harvard University) in the northwestern region of Botswana,
among !Kung who sometimes followed their traditional ways, but who were in­
creasingly learning the ways of their new agricultural and cattle-owning
neighbors, the Tswana and Herero.

The instrumental music presented here, from both periods, is performed
on traditional instruments--ones which rely on materials found in the natural
environment--and on innovative instruments--ones which use materials, such as
metal wire and cans, which can only be obtained through trade. The traditional
instruments include the hunting bow (a wooden bow and gut string), the
pluriarc (a wooden, guitar-like body with 5 gut strings), and the te bow (a
vertical wooden post and gut string). In its "modernized" form, the base of
the pluriarc is made of an empty gallon oil can while the strings are changed
from gut to hair from the tail of a giraffe. The hunting bow is transformed
by a metal wire in place of the gut string, and in another form, it has a tin
can as a resonator. (See Nicholas England for exact description and photographs
of these instruments.) Another instrument found only relatively recently among
the !Kung (30 years at most) is the sitengena, or "thumb piano" (wooden base
and metal keys). Probably borrowed from neighboring peoples, it was one of
the most highly favored and most often heard instruments among young people
(1969-76).

San instrumental music is not generally performed before an audience with
all the tension that isolation of the performer implies. Instead the people
play for themselves, when the mood strikes them. Others nearby may go on with
what they are doing, stop and listen, or join in.

The selections on the tape have been arranged to introduce the listener
to the full range of this music, including short selections which emphasize
the tonal colors of the various instruments and longer selections which help
to convey the deeply moving, almost hypnotic effect of an individual's
creative outpouring. For those who have seen the films, "The Hunters" or
"Bitter Melons," on the !Kung by John Marshall (N.E.R., 5 Bridge St., Watertown,
Massachusetts) the musical selections from the films may prove to be familiar.

*Inquiries should be sent to Marjorie Shostak, Peabody Museum, Harvard University,
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138.
Side One


Band #2  Metal pluriaric with one woman's voice. Composed and sung by Hwan/a of !Xabe. Recorded in Botswana by Megan BieseIe, 1972.

Some of the words:

--Zhu zhu ku n/a mi o = People, people are talking about me, oh!
--We, we o mi ma, o we = Come, come to me my own, my very own.
--Zhu ku cha mi o = People are tricking me.
--Aiye, gu mi o, aiye, = Mother, come take me.

Perhaps the meaning of the words is as follows:

She wants her lover to come to her but people are talking about it and saying things to her. Her final lament is to her mother, for her to come and take her away from all the talk.


Some of the words:

/Canwa ku kainya mi = God hates me, where
kuri mi ku o? /Canwa = can I go? God, bad
chi dooli kuri mi ku nln o. = God, where can I rest, oh!

Jimmy is an unusual person. The words to his songs and his statements about himself are quite similar—he sees himself as very much alone and as having been ostracized by the community.

He claims that he goes into trance while playing the sitengena and that he communicates with the spiritual world this way. He says his songs come directly from this experience.

He is definitely one of the most innovative and influential musicians in the area. All his compositions are played by the children and he is said to have composed most of the songs everyone plays.
Side Two

Band #1  Te bow with two women's voices. Recorded in Kauri, Botswana by Megan Biese1e, 1972.

Band #2  Tin can bow solo. Recorded in Namibia by Nicholas England, 1951-55.

Band #3  Sitengena solo: "Rain Song." Recorded in Kauri, Botswana by Megan Biese1e, 1972.


Band #5  Gut pluriarc with one man's voice. Recorded in Namibia by Nicholas England, 1951-55. Music is on sound track of "The Hunters."

Band #6  Metal pluriarc with one woman's voice. Played and sung by Hwan/a of !Xabe. Recorded in Botswana by Megan Biese1e, 1972.

Band #7  Gut hunting bow with one man's voice. Recorded in Namibia by Nicholas England, 1951-55. Music is on the sound track of "Bitter Melons."

Further Reading

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1. Megan Biese1e, "Song Texts by the Master of Tricks: Kalahari San Thumb Piano Music," Botswana Notes and Records, vol. 7, pp. 171-188 (also available as reprint from the African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin).


A !Kung San man resting. Photo by Marjorie Shostak/Anthro-Photo.

A !Kung San mother and child. Photo by Marjorie Shostak/Anthro-Photo.

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