The Music of !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, Africa

Recorded by John Phillipson / Edited by Moses Asch / Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4487
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 part 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 23°30' east of Greenwich and a few minutes north of the Tropic of Capricorn. They lived on crushed berries, roasted roots and meat cooked over fire, and since it was dry season in a waterless desert, the Bushmen ate tasteless but juicy Tswana melons. (The beginning of the word Tswana 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, foot-stomping, 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" x 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 one prong to another 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 Ghanzi 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 or nuts 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 2 1/2 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 16-mm movie cameras, two tripods, light-meters and 2,000 feet of color film; a 35-mm. range-finder camera, another single-lens 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), bread-rums 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. I took 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 time-honored technique of kissing babies might or might not have worked; the motives of an obvious bachelor going around kissing laborers 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 as I came and went as I pleased and by the time the women came back, the chatter was indistinguishable.

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 go about and singing sounds, throaty gurgles and clicks, explosive ends and stations...
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 un­treed antelope skins which I presumed were to sleep on...

They made fires 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, and a disengaged piece of it, began to burn because of the friction. They would then tip the bushmen's 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 two seconds to light a fire. Another way, used mainly to light pipes was to strike a flint obliquely with a metal object, and blow on it until a flame was made. That did not take more than a second. The fire was, however, too weak to light the tobacco and pipe. They would blow on the spark produced and inane until the pipe was lit.

The next morning I woke before sunrise while most of the Bushmen were still sleeping beside the exh­tinguished fires. I walked around on the sand trying to warm myself because the night had been cold and the early morning even colder. The camp was spread in a vague semicircle, each family by a thorny tree, the trunk of which was used as a base for a semicircular lean-to, quickly made of interwoven branches and grass. That was all there was to a Bushman's home. Each slept on the sand covered by his carosses, which is a treated animal skin made into a formless garment that also served as a cover, jidnas, as 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 cumberlid for water, wherever 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. The surviving Bushmen approaching them as closely as they could without getting scorch­ed by the heat and laughter started again. The sun came up and half an hour later I felt comfortable enough to start working. I unpacked my camera and without bothering to lead them with sticks 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 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 while I was the greatest blessing in the life of the documentary film­maker in Africa who wished for. Making documentary films in Africa is a rather difficult, tricky and sometime delicate affair. My only difficulty was communication. I could never ask anyone to repeat anything on the sake of taking 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 the 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 camera they thought I was satisfied with a modest degree of hastiness. I usually 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 and for they promptly left me to my own devices. But, notwithstanding the frustration of the job, it was, by and large, 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 work. The men who had not gone hunting set down to continue the long process of turning skins into soft carosses. The shaving of the animals was done expertly, and 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 the smoothness. The turpentine was smeared on the hairy side of the skin and burned vigorously in the bushmen's fire, and the pieces that had been worn smooth by usage. The hair fell off and the skin became soft and supple. Then they took the hide into the next, and anchored it with their toes, and began an endless pulling and crumpling. The crumpling continued until the hide was dry and smooth. 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 every meal, or went out in small, gathering groups to find and fetch Tsamma melons and roots. The berries were small, about the size of large 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 moseyed about, 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 soon approached the voices became fainter and finally stopped. The men were out and the films 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 mutual clicks. The groups became larger, there was a sound of 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 thumb­piano 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. The men 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 joking, 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 who played the thumb­piano nearby while the old ones held their hands in their heads or covered them with carosses to protect their badly infected eyes from the brightness of the desert.

Eating was a very simple affair that took place in mid­morning 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 was meat, when the hunters had been lucky. Instead of water, which was simply not available in the dry season, everybody ate Tsamma melons using the sharp ends of their two­foot digging sticks to cut the pieces. The easiest and most rewarding film I ever made 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. Lack of communication never bothered me after the third day. When I wanted to go hunting I went to Tsawwe the hunter, pointed to the sun and then very low toward the east to indicate the time, and placed an imaginary pointed arrow in his belly. He rolled with fake misery on the sand 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 Tsawwe knew like I have never known anything, with the passion for survival and the lifelong and single­minded 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, burst out to be a little sweet the day was somehow filled to the brim.

...(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 shook with laughter, and one goes that joke again, they must have thought; this time he rewards our hospitality with tobacco is nothing but a good joke, worth at least a laugh, so they laughed. So I left them like that -- laugh­ing.

BIOGRAPHY

John Phillipson is a young Canadian mining engineer, who has lived and worked in Africa. Mr. Phillipson is also a renowned nature picture documentary producer, who has "shot" a number of films in Africa soon to be released.
4352. MUSIC OF VIET NAM. Introduction to the rich musical heritage of North, South, and Central Viet Nam. Examples selected by native folklorist Pham Duc include traditional folk songs, Montagnar tribal, Imperial court, and chamber music. Also features Pham Duc in 3 of his own folk songs. Ho Lo (Song of Peasant), Thuong Binh (The Wounded Soldier), Ganh Lua (Carrying Paddy Song). Collected by Crofoot and Addis. Background notes. LC R-65-1682 1-12 LP.

SOUTH ASIA

4447. MUSIC FROM SOUTH ASIA. Variety of musical styles and traditions from Nepal, Hyderabad, Goa, Sind, Kashmir, Pakistan. LC R-57-177 CB.

4422. MUSIC OF INDIA: TRADITIONAL AND CLASSICAL. Raga singing, folk songs, instrumental music, recorded in India. LC R-59-54 1-12 LP.

4431. RELIGIOUS MUSIC OF INDIA. Hymn to the God Shiva, Vedic chanting, selections from The Ramayana, more, recorded in India. Notes include transcriptions. LC R-59-629 1-12 " LP.

6847. SONGS OF ISRAEL. Hebrew songs of the Diaspora, sung by Hillel and Aviva. Notes with English translations. LC R-59-54 1-12 LP.

7278. HOLIDAY SONGS OF ISRAEL. Popular children's songs celebrating Passover and other holidays, sung by Geula Gill. Notes with English translations. LC R-68-603 1-12 LP.

4404. FOLK AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF TURKEY. Native folk artists, choruses and instrumental groups perform dance music, heroic, love, and wedding songs, more. Traditional instruments. LC R-A-56-270 1-12 LP.

4480. ARABIC AND DRUSE MUSIC. Welcome songs, songs of eulogy, wedding and festival music, much transcribed in restitution notes with English translations. LC R-4-57-67 1-12 LP.

8943. ISLAMIC LITURGY—SONG AND DANCE AT A MEETING OF DERVISHES. Recitation from the Koran, odes, prayers, chants, more. Notes with English translations. LC R-4-57-67 1-12 LP.

6847. SONGS OF ISRAEL. Hebrew songs of the Diaspora, sung by Hillel and Aviva. Notes with English translations. LC R-59-629 1-12 LP.

SOUTH ASIA


AFRICA

6847. SONGS OF ISRAEL. Hebrew songs of the Diaspora, sung by Hillel and Aviva. Notes with English translations. LC R-59-629 1-12 LP.

THE MIDDLE EAST

4421. MUSIC OF SOUTH ARABIA. Bedouin sword dance, traditional Aden love songs, wedding songs of Yemenite Jews, more. LC R-59-74 1-12 LP.

8832. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE PROTHA. Notes with English translations. LC R-56-1682 1-12 LP.

8816. AFFIB BULOS SINGS SONGS OF LEBANON, SYRIA, AND JORDAN. Traditional folk songs, with native instruments. Arabic text with English translation.

4361. MUSIC OF AFGHANISTAN. Performances of native folk artists and folk orchestras recorded by Radio Kabul, Afghanistan.

4103. KURDISH FOLK MUSIC FROM WESTERN IRAN. Heroic, love, lullaby, dance songs, more. 1-12 LP.

4439. MUSIC OF MOROCCO. First documentary recording of native Moroccan music. Tribal songs and dances recorded by anthropologist Christopher Wanklyn, who wrote notes.


4428. SONGS OF THE WATUTUSI. Warrior, hunting songs. LC R-63-123 1-12 LP.

EUROPE

4454. FOLK MUSIC OF GREECE. Songs and dances from Crete, Epirus, Macedonia, Cyprus, Peloponnnesus, Naxos, Rhodes, Pontus, Native instruments.

4467. FOLK SONGS OF AUSTRIA. Recorded in Tyrol, Styria, Burgenland, more. Notes, glossary, map.

4434. FOLK MUSIC OF YUGOSLAVIA. Dance tunes, love, epic, work songs from Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, elsewhere. Recorded by Laura Boulton.

4441. FOLK MUSIC OF THE U.S.S.R. From both European and Asian regions: Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbek, more. LC R-63-102 NY 2-12 LP.

8807. MOUNTAIN SONGS AND YODELING OF THE ALPS. The Shepherd, The Cuckoo, Echo Yodel, various accordion tunes, more, played and sung in German. LC R-58-560 1-12 LP.

4414. FOLK MUSIC OF FRANCE. Recorded in Normandie, Provence, Orleans, Bretagne, Vendee, Alsace, Corsica, more. Notes.

4411. FOLK MUSIC OF SPAIN. Primitive songs, jotas, flamenco and bagpipe music, recorded in Navarre, Galicia, Asturias, Catalonia, Majorca.

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

For additional recordings from Pacific islands see our Complete Numerical Listing (pp. 25-30)