

I.L.A.M. RECORDING TOUR

(South West Africa and north-western Cape)

by

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The Library undertook a brief recording tour of South West Africa and the north-western Cape regions from May 11th to June 19th, 1965.

Accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Crena de Iongh and my veteran African assistant, Daniel Mabuto, we travelled from Johannesburg on the 1,100 mile-route across to South West Africa through Kuruman, (the site of the famous early mission station from which David Livingstone set out on his first African journeys) and Uppington in the Cape Province, into South West Africa via Karasburg, Keetmanshoop and Rehoboth and on to Windhoek, the capital. Here the necessary formalities were accomplished before starting in the northern section.

The territory of South West is sparsely populated except in the extreme north, and is bounded by deserts on both east and west, the Kalahari and the Namib. It has no running rivers except on its northern and southern boundaries, the Kunene with the Okavango in the north and the Orange in the south. Rainfall varies from an inch or so only, on the west coast to about eighteen inches on the central uplands around Windhoek, and falls away again in the east towards Bechuanaland and the Kalahari. In such circumstances the small population is clustered mostly along the few sandy river beds where a certain amount of water is conserved underground, and those few places where wells and boreholes have made habitation possible. Distances between settlements are large with an average of fifty miles or more between small country towns or villages. Places marked in the road maps of the territory are no guarantee of present occupation.

In these desert and semi-desert regions of the Karoo scrub variety, sheep farming is carried on, while in the higher rainfall sandveld and bush areas, cattle ranching is the main occupation with a few mining enterprises in remote parts. General conditions, therefore, bear little resemblance to other parts of central and southern Africa. Under these conditions, with the single exception of Ovamboland, music research faces unusual difficulties. The population being so scattered, the people are unusually shy and uncommunicative, while in the few urban areas the mixture of cultures is so complete that little trace can be found of any originality of indigenous style. A long history of marauding and cattle rustling, notably by the Herero from the north and the mulatto groups from the south, ensured the maximum genetic admixture, followed by the administration of the territory by the Germans and latterly, since 1915, by South Africans.

Of the total population of approximately half a million, nearly half are Ovambo (250,000), the second largest ethnic group being of European descent (75,000). The remaining significant groups include Damara (45,000), Herero (35,000), Nama (35,000), Okavango (30,000) and Bushmen (12,000).

The southern Nama, the Damara and the Bushmen speak Khoisan or 'click' language, and the remainder one or other of the Bantu tongues. The Damara have adopted the Khoisan in preference to their original Bantu language.

In the circumstances it was remarkable that in the short time available, and in view of the great distances which had to be covered, that we were able to record 111 items within South West Africa and an additional 31 in the north-western Cape at the O'Okiep Copper Mine.

Of the South West items, 71 were from the Ovambo; 23 Damara; 9 Herero; 4 Nama; 3 Okavango and 1 Luvale.

Two features of the music were remarkable. The few Herero items were immediately recognisable as being similar to the music of the Hima people of the great lakes region, more particularly to the Haya of Bukoba on the south-west corner of Lake Victoria. The Ovambo music in many instances could hardly be distinguished from Luvale music originating some 300 or more miles to the north-east on the southern Congo border. A linguist, Dr. Ernst Westfall, of Cape Town University whom I consulted, maintained that there had been a connection between the two people some 300 years ago, but that they had had no recent contact. The Herero are popularly believed to have come from the Hima group several centuries ago, and the coincidence of similar musical styles would seem to support this evidence.

More than half the items were of singing unaccompanied by any instruments or percussion. Three varieties of Mbira, plucked reeds, were seen among the Okavango, the *Dingo*, the *Nsansi* and the *Shitandi*, but none elsewhere.

The Ovambo accompanied 14 of their songs with clapping; 3 with stamping; 2 with a stressed bow; and one each with drums and friction bow. The remainder (50) were unaccompanied.

The Damara accompanied 13 songs with clapping; 2 with a stressed bow; one with stamping and one with a guitar.

The Herero accompanied 5 of their 9 songs with clapping.

The Nama songs were all accompanied by guitar.

This tally of instruments and clapping reflects the nature of the country which for the most part has few trees and in many places none at all. This phenomenon is found all over central and southern Africa where similar treeless conditions prevail.

One can but draw the conclusion from the sampling of evidence collected, that the more southerly people of South West Africa are only mildly musical, and what they have in the way of songs is simple indeed. Of the two northern tribes, the Okavango show the more advanced inclinations towards musical development, but since I was not able to go up to their river settlements, the few examples cannot be called a true sample, but only a slight indication of their musical talent.

The Ovambo on the other hand are certainly active singers, with only the occasional and unimportant use of an accompanying instrument of the simplest nature. Moreover, their songs show a clear tendency to reflect their social preoccupation with cattle, no less than 15 songs being concerned with herding and handling cattle. Another 7 songs were praises, mostly the praises of cattle and chiefs, while 6 songs were self-praises. Their other musical preferences were for wedding songs (15) and drinking songs (7).

The few Herero songs were all direct or indirect praises of their chiefs, notably Chief Samuel Maherero, with an air of despondency for lost glory and regret for their present inability to dominate and prey upon other tribes.

The Damara in the simplest terms were concerned primarily with little dance tunes (9).

One can only conclude from the brief evidence collected, that the influence of the Cape, with the intrusion of the Afrikaans language in the south among the Nama and Basters (people of mixed Caucasian/African origin), and in administration throughout the territory is likely to remain dominant and that the simpler Cape styles of music may well constitute the sum total of the musical ambitions of all but the two northerly tribes. The old established German missions have also made their musical presence felt in most districts in schools and church, and the only true folk music which is likely to persist in the face of such foreign influence will be that of the north. Even in those

regions the long established Scandinavian missions have made their mark and the popular hymns sung by the Ovambo are all strongly couched in distinctively northern European styles.

It appears that so far there has been no serious attempt to study the logic of indigenous folk musics, and the relationship between vernacular stress-and-tone and musical settings is a closed book to all but a handful of persons. Unless a keener interest can be shown by African and European teachers alike, the prospect for the development of indigenous musical forms within this country is dim indeed, although the typical innate distortion of the popular foreign music in the mouths of Africans is as prevalent here as elsewhere on the continent.

Most of the recordings were taken at the Tsumeb Mine in the northern part of the territory and on the Oranjemund Diamond Mines on the south-west coast, at both places by the kind invitation of the mining authorities who made all facilities available. The north-western Cape recordings were all of Xhosa workers and were taken on the mine property of the O'Okiep Copper Mines, through whose hospitality we were able to meet and record their African mining staff. These items were indigenous and familiar to the Transkei on the eastern seaboard, a region in which the Library field recording unit worked in 1957.

We did not make contact with the Bushman as this tour was not equipped for that purpose, which requires special camping facilities and 4-wheel drive vehicles.

The Library intends to publish a selection of the South West Africa recordings as soon as funds can be allocated for this purpose.