

RECORDING IN THE LOST VALLEY

by

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Collecting the music of the Valley Tonga Tribe in the Gwembe district, of the Zambesi Valley, 21st to 30th June, 1957.

By kind invitation of the Director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institution, Lusaka, Mr. Henry Fosbrooke, and by the Curator of the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum at Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, Dr. Desmond Clark, the recording unit of the Library visited the valley of the Zambesi to record some of the music of that section of the Valley Tonga tribe which will be forced to leave their riverside homes when the waters of the Kariba Dam begin to rise next year, 1958.

We were invited to make Dr. Clark's camp our headquarters while we were in the Valley, which proved convenient as it enabled us to take advantage of the cooking and other facilities already in existence at the camp. The camp itself could hardly have been situated in a better position, on a wide sweep of the river looking across to the far bank, where in a green belt of trees there lived a herd of 26 elephants which we saw every day when they came down to drink, and heard every night as they pulled down the branches of trees or quarrelled among themselves.

Knowing, as we do, the amount of physical energy which the organisation of a camp, and especially the cooking, will take up, we were particularly grateful to Dr. Clark and his two assistants for the hospitality of the camp, which left us free to concentrate on our recordings.

The short portion of the Valley covered is situated about 80 to 100 miles up-stream from the Kariba Dam site itself, in a region where the waters of the river rise about 300 feet above the present ground level. It was a strange experience to live amongst a natural landscape which will be utterly lost and dead beneath the water in so short a while. It heightened one's sense of awareness to see so much fertile land, so many great tamarind and baobab trees, old enough for Livingstone to have seen them when he passed through the district about 100 years before, all condemned to death by the rising river.

One of the first songs we recorded had a line which read "What are these aeroplanes which we can hear but cannot see?" They were, of course, the voice of doom for that part of the valley, as the aeroplanes in question were the aerial survey planes which were mapping the country to determine the position of the eventual flood level (1590 feet above sea level), and they were flying at about 18,000 feet, too high to be seen from the ground.

The Valley Tonga are a branch of the Plateau Tonga people of the south western regions of Northern Rhodesia. The ones affected by the Kariba Dam number about 50,000, of whom 30,000 live on the north bank and the remainder on the south, in Northern and Southern Rhodesia respectively.

They have a legendary history which would indicate that they belong to the Karanga migration of Southern Rhodesia of the Monomotapa period and they share several legends with the Karanga or Shona such as the one about their saintly leader striking the waters of the great river Zambesi so that the migrating people could cross over dryshod.

They have lived a comparatively remote life within the valley on account of the steep escarpment of hills on either side, making communication and road building difficult, the excessive heat of the valley in summer and the fact that there were no mineral or other natural features which would have attracted outside economic attention.

Both in their manner and their dress, they resemble the Southern Karanga people of the early 1920's, most of the women still wearing homemade leather aprons and occasionally cotton dresses, and everyone using a minimum of clothing as the climate does not often demand warm clothes. Their main source of cash income is from migratory labour, the chief centre for their employment being Bulawayo, which they speak of as the 'great town.'

They live in unusually large villages, of several hundred huts together along the river banks on account of the fact that the fertile soil is limited in extent and for the most part adjacent to the river itself.

Their homes are simple thatched huts made of mud and poles with the very minimum of domestic furniture, their grain bins being supported on stilts about two or three feet above the ground in order to avoid the annual floods.

The ten day visit resulted in 72 recordings, most of them taken from five villages, the two largest being those of Chipepo and Sinefwala. They consisted of the following categories . . .

- 1 Traditional Child's verse
- 2 Love songs
- 1 Wedding song

- 3 Burial Party songs
- 5 Rain songs
- 1 Morality songs
- 3 Domestic work songs
- 1 Agricultural work song
- 1 Canoe launching song
- 10 Drinking songs
- 1 Topical song
- 2 Humorous songs
- 1 Party song
- 5 Mendicant's songs
- 1 Lament
- 8 Self-delectative songs—with instrumental accompaniment
- 17 Dance songs
- 5 Story songs
- 1 Riddles
- 1 Drum rhythm
- 1 Instrumental item.

This list gives a fair cross section of the kinds of music which interest the local people, with a preponderance of dance songs and drinking songs, but with a fair selection of the usual types of social songs to be found in most African communities.

It cannot be said, either from the quantity or the quality of the items recorded, that the Valley Tonga are a "musical" people when compared with many another Bantu tribe. There are, however, several interesting customs associated with music and more especially their rain making songs, as they live in a region which has an average of less than 10 inches of rain a year. Their summer gardens are constantly prone to drought conditions and their winter gardens, which are planted on the alluvium all along the banks and on the small islands as soon as the river recedes from its flood levels, are constantly harassed by hippopotamus. Between the two evils of drought and wild animals, the Valley Tonga have often been subjected to temporary famine between summer and winter reapings. The advantage of having two crops a year, the one from the river banks and the other from the higher ground, may have made them, perhaps, a little less provident and a little more light-hearted than many other Bantu communities.

It is significant to note how little use they make of the great river itself. They have few canoes and what there are are mostly used for ferrying people across to the Southern Rhodesian bank where many of them have their gardens. (The inter-territorial boundary means very little to people living in such remote places so far from administrative headquarters.) No use at all is made of the river water for irrigating crops—they either grow or they do not—and the fishing is almost exclusively confined to the catching of small fry with portable traps in the shallows or to simple rod and line from the bank. The cost of fish hooks, they said, was too high.

Their musical instruments are not numerous and include the following varieties:—

	<i>Incidence per item recorded</i>
1. Musical Bows, vertical, gourd resonated.	7
2. Antelope Horns	4
3. Transverse Flutes	2
4. Mbira (Hand pianos) two varieties	9
5. Loose note Xylophones	1
6. Drums	21
7. Rattles	3
8. Hand clapping	13
with 9. Unaccompanied songs	12
	72

The incidence of instrumental accompaniments gives a true picture of the range of all the instruments discovered throughout the six or seven villages in which we recorded. From the tunings of the instruments measured, they would appear to be a heptatonic people.

The *Vertical Bow* is the usual stressed bow, gourd resonated, which is found in most parts of Southern Africa, being similar in every respect to the Zulu *Makweyana*.

The *Antelope Horns*, which are perhaps their favourite instruments, are made mostly from lechwe horns and are played in ensembles. The largest ensemble recorded had 17 horns each with its own name and pitch. They varied from about 5" to 18" in length.

The *Transverse Flutes* were three holed, and unusually short, being only five inches overall.

The *Mbira (Hand pianos)* appeared to have been adopted from neighbouring tribes, the *Kankobela*, fan shaped instrument from the Lozi tribe, up river, and the *Deza*, board shaped with external resonator, from the Korekore, down river.

The loose note *Xylophone* was a simple instrument used exclusively at seed planting time. The notes were supported on the players' thighs and the position of the notes were changed to suit the melody played.

Drums formed by far the most important role in their music. Both goblet and conical shaped drums are used, often in ensembles or batteries, up to seven drums of different pitch and tone quality together. *Drum and pipe* ensembles are also the favourite instruments for young people's dances, and sometimes stick rhythms as well but not to the same extent as the Plateau Tonga to the north.

Rattles were sometimes used, both hand rattles made from gourds and leg rattles made from the shell of a wild fruit strung onto sticks and attached to the calf of each leg.

Hand clapping was the usual accompaniment of the women's songs, and the percussive sounds of grindstone and mortar set the tempo for their domestic work songs.

One item in six was unaccompanied by any instrument.

The following extracts from the translations of some of their recorded songs give a glimpse into their philosophy though, naturally, a far wider range of songs and a wide knowledge of their language would be needed to do justice to the lyrics of their composers. . . .

"I cannot marry a Luvale or a Shona girl, because they put on ties. Their only duty is to cut grass, therefore I cannot marry a woman like that."

"Blow up the fire, my love, so that I can see your face."

"I was sad because the love of my heart had gone away. So I sat for a whole day saying 'Who shall I talk to?' So my Father said 'My dear son, what can we do?' and the Chief said 'You'll just have to walk all day to get her . . . don't think of lions or anything else.'"

"If you kill someone, you will go to prison at Gwembe. They will bring ropes to tie your hands and feet. What has tempted you to kill people? You must think of what I am telling you now."

"My Father's relatives, you must come and see me and find out what difficulties I am in. I am suffering like a dog, can't you come and assist me? If I am really your son you should help me."

"You bachelors . . . How do you like sleeping alone? You go to work in towns but when you return home you fail to pay your 'bride price.' You are queer fellows. What do you go to town for? I do not sleep alone and I am sorry for you. Oh, let me go, I don't want to stay with you bachelors. You had better consult the diviners and ask them to tell you your fortune."

"When you go to town, do not tell my love that I am nearly a full grown girl, so that he will continue working for me and come back and find me quite grown up."

"The foreman took us for training before we started our duties in the morning, ordering us to 'go on working.' If I were a young man I would hit the foreman. We would rather die than be forced to go on working."

"I am lonely, and I wish you would come and help me. Who will sing me my Mother's song before I die. I am ashamed because there is no-one who will sing me my Mother's song."

"When you have a special kind of relish, you put salt in it. You say it is very tasty indeed and thank the cook."

The general impression gleaned from lyrics of this nature is one of a simple people with few contacts with the industrial world outside their valley.

The music itself is almost invariably simple in structure, lively and effective for its purpose within the local community, but of little intrinsic musical interest to outsiders. The most complex phenomena are to be found in the playing of their drum ensembles and we made some good recordings which brought out this aspect by introducing each drum in turn.

The final impression as we left the valley was of a happy, friendly and well-mannered community, somewhat bewildered by the impending flooding but not unduly worried either about leaving their ancestral homes or about the adjustment they will have to make up on the hills beyond the range of the waters.

They firmly believe that although the dam will rise, the waters will eventually go down again as they have always done in the past, and, some day, they will return to their quiet and remote valley.

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