RECORDING TOUR OF THE TSWANA TRIBE

Western Transvaal and Bechuanaland Protectorate

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER, 1959

Little or nothing has been written or recorded in the last 25 years on the subject of Tswana music, and when the Field Recording Unit of the Library set out to try to fill part of this gap, careful preparations were made beforehand. On account of the relatively short distances from the Library Headquarters which were involved and from well founded suspicions that the Tswana were not inclined to be co-operative, it was decided to make a preliminary tour in order to visit most of the Chiefs and villages where we intended to record.

By kindness and permission of the Bantu Administration Department of the Union of South Africa and the Resident Commissioner of Bechuanaland, in whose adjacent Territories most of the Tswana people are situated, this exploratory journey covered most of the western Transvaal region and, briefly, one village in the Protectorate. Circulars were posted to all concerned explaining the object of the Library's recording tour which was to add a number of examples of genuine Tswana music to the growing list of authentic recordings which are now being published by the Library in the "Sound of Africa" series of Long Playing records for educational and study purposes.

The eventual result was somewhat disappointing and often perplexing and it may be of interest to speculate upon the underlying causes which have made this recording tour so unlike any other we have had throughout Central and Southern Africa.

The Tswana people live in the region west of Johannesburg which lies between the Rand and the Kalahari desert in the Bechuanaland Protectorate about 350 miles distant. They are classified under their several clans or sub-tribes, each with its own dialect. Of the twelve recognised divisions we visited nine, including the Rolong (Tsidi), Ngwaketse, Hurutshe, Tlharo, Kwena, Kgatla, Ngwato, Lete and Tlokwa. The other three lived in districts too remote for this present journey and were left over for some future occasion. The Ngwato and Tlokwa provided no items for recording for a variety of reasons. Our tour gave us an overall picture of the homes and home conditions of the Tswana people however brief, and from first impressions it was immediately clear that this tribe is perhaps the best housed of any in southern Africa. They build in a variety of styles using both rectangular cottages and round huts under thatch or iron roofs, the constant local feature being the yard or *lapa* which is to be found in front of, or surrounding, each family home. In many places they are constructed of well built walls, handsomely decorated in patterns of local coloured clays or in monochromes; in others they are made of brushwood, while to the north west hedges of a kind of euphorbia are used. A large number of Tswana have built small European style suburban houses. A well made and decorated walled *lapa* gives an atmosphere of grace and establishment to a Tswana house possessed by few African dwellings elsewhere.

In the east, agriculture and mining rights (platinum and chrome) are their chief source of local wealth while towards the west and the Kalahari desert cattle are their mainstay. Their standard of living must compare more than favourably with most other tribes and a large proportion of both men and women find employment in and around Pretoria and Johannesburg, especially along the West Rand.

Whatever their musical abilities may have been in the past they cannot claim to be prolific musicians to-day in comparison with most other tribes of this Continent. In the foreground they appear to participate half-heartedly in the current Africanised jazz of the towns and the usual run of African school music and hymns, little of which is more than common-place. In the background, however, there is every sign of distinctive Tswana styles of music if only their innate secretiveness would allow them to be heard.

It is well known that there are three stages of African social development all of which have their own musical preferences. The first stage belongs to the normal African life before European conquest. In this stage music developed openly, hand in hand with all social and political events, the more articulate of the tribe continually composing new songs in well defined styles which graced the occasion without in any way distorting the sense and flow of their poetry and lyrics. The folk music though simple was not primitive and in many cases may have been much more complex than the music that followed.

The second stage was inaugurated by missionaries who instilled a sense of disgrace in their converts for most things which reflected their indigenous life and in particular music which they considered inferior or firmly associated with a pagan way of life. Later, this feeling of humiliation was strongly reinforced through the schools which taught foreign music only, regardless of the gibberish it made of the sung vernacular or the magical belief it engendered in everything European at the expense of anything which was intrinsically African.

The majority of younger Africans to-day are still being brought up within the limited horizon of this second stage, with little knowledge or appreciation of the function or value of their musical heritage, attempting only to use music in what they consider to be the 'superior' European manner. It is essentially a magical and not a rational or aesthetic stage, supported largely by ignorance, by a white collar snobbery and by a lack of perspective on the part of both teacher and pupil.

The third stage is one of maturity in which the individual has outgrown his sense of inferiority in relationship to the foreign races with whom he has come in contact and can afford to take a long view of both past and future without fear of losing his place in the social scale.

It is the frustrations and misgivings of the second stage which seem to have given rise to the present nationalist fervours which have gripped so many African countries. Lacking the maturity of the third stage they cannot hope to progress either culturally or politically, until they have come to terms with themselves and their emerging society.

The Tswana, with few exceptions, appear to be firmly in the grip of the second stage with all its divided loyalties, suspicions and frustrations. It seems to be so acute that one was constantly made aware of a kind of dual personality, the one which clung to the spiritual norms of the tribe demonstrated in their annual initiation schools and ceremonies, and the other attempting to achieve the urban standards of life and way of living of Europeans, if not by honest means then by every covert one, including widespread thieving and prostitution. Whole communities were found to be divided into two hostile camps and hardly on speaking terms with each other over these matters.

The opportunities offered them for anti-social behaviour by the proximity of the huge industrial complex of the southern Transvaal have been well exploited. It would be a mistake, I think, exclusively to blame the urban existence they enjoy while employed there, as the Tswana, of all southern African tribes, are the only ones who are normally urban and live in large towns of their own, a population of ten to thirty thousand or more being the usual size of a Tswana settlement in Bechuanaland, such as Kanye, Molepolole, Mochudi and Serowe. This can only be compared with the still larger African towns of West Africa, such as Ibadan, Abeokuta or Kumasi.

Whatever the cause, one is confronted with the impression that the Tswana are feeling uneasy and perplexed by their perfidy without the ability or spiritual vitality to put matters right. "Our women are the curse of our tribe!" exclaimed one elder discoursing on the spectacular decline of sexual morality which brings thousands of illegitimate children of polyglot paternity back to the home villages from the African townships near Pretoria and Johannesburg to be brought up by their long suffering grandmothers. If democracy is "dialogue", as one B.B.C. speaker has recently said, then, surely, Tswana men are the most democratic of all Africans. Whatever the extent of their deliberations they fail to achieve control over their own womenfolk who are a law unto themselves. The present day grandmothers are already complaining. The next generation of grandmothers may well rebel against the imposition they, themselves, inflicted upon their parents.

"The music of the women is secret" said one informant trying to explain why we heard no domestic songs so common anywhere else in Africa. As we walked through the villages we did not hear a single Tswana woman singing while she was pounding her grain or nursing her child, her grandchild or the child of the anonymous lodger from town.

"The music of the women is sacred" said another, hinting that the only songs common to women were those sung at the girls' initiation ceremonies. This, perhaps, was a shade nearer the true explanation. In some villages we learnt that, although all the population were Christians, three quarters of the young men and women still underwent their traditional pagan initiations. Others claimed smaller proportions of Christians but an equally high percentage of initiates. Others again claimed that the missionaries had eradicated circumcision rites altogether with the support of the Chief but still more than half of the community remained pagan. "The Church is making no progress here," said a local missionary.

Every excuse was given by some of the Chiefs and elders to avoid our recording of Tswana music; these examples are typical, and all of them patently false . . .

"The people think you are only wanting to record Tswana music in order to show how primitive they are."

"We have no music here, only school songs."

"The women have no songs."

"Is this what you are doing . . . recording primitive music for the Bantustans?"

"There is no music here, only out at the cattle posts."

"There is no Tswana music at the cattle posts, the boys play only guitars and concertinas."

"The Kgotla (Council of Men) must meet before you can be allowed to record."

Yet, at the next village, we would find people willing and delighted to record their so-called "sacred" or "secret" songs, because the Chief had achieved 'stage three' and a mature perspective on life. Admittedly, we were in most cases the first people who had visited them in order to take an interest in their own compositions. "If you come again," many of them said with relief after they had sung for us and heard other recordings, "we will have plenty of proper Tswana songs for you to record."

The cause of their present distrust and indecision seems to spring partly from the virulence of the external attack made by whites in the past upon the Tswana spiritualities including folk music and, internally, from the abject acceptance of this foreign disparagement through an urgent desire for material progress by all those means which would appear to associate them with a stronger culture. It is a state

of affairs which can be readily exploited by the politically minded when given a concrete excuse such as the interruption in what some of them consider to be the true line of succession of their Chiefs, or the registration of the women who previously found considerable profit through thieving, prostitution and illicit liquor selling under the cloak of pseudonyms which could not readily be traced.

The Tswana, it would appear, are suffering from an acute reaction to the strain now imposed upon the tribe as a whole and upon individuals in particular who must adjust themselves to the juxtaposition of an amorphous industrial civilisation in which greater freedom of action must be balanced by individual rather than community responsibilities, in other words, the intrusion of the twentieth century into an unprepared Africa. While they are eager by all accounts to participate in the licence afforded them in the industrial cities they are not yet able to match their morals to their new circumstances. The more conservative of them would seem to prefer a retreat into a kind of ideal African isolation. Many of the clerk class of men with whom we spoke profess to be concerned only with building for the future. At the same time it was clear that they had cut away their own foundations by ignoring the virtue of those inherent qualities which are reflected in their language through verse and song, and the value of long established custom connected with the achievement of adulthood.

They appear to be attracted by the publicity and power of modern politics yet stubbornly retain the secrecy of the initiation rites. It may not have occurred to them that they could still make the best of both worlds if they openly admitted the verity and satisfaction they find in their indigenous beliefs, and studied the undoubted virtue of their natural arts of which perhaps one of the most socially important is their Tswana music. Secrecy and ignorance in connection with both these aspects of life must inevitably militate against the steady evolution of their community.

Luckily, the Tswana, like so many other African tribes, are capable of throwing up mature persons who are already well launched into the 'third stage' and can view the situation with aesthetic taste and the ability to analyse and evaluate. We met several excellent individuals with the necessary qualifications and strength of character who, if properly encouraged and instructed in official and educational circles, could help to retain the solid ground of the wisdom of past generations under the feet of those who are trying too soon to swim out of their depth. Tswana folk music, of which we already have sufficient recordings to indicate a decided character, can help to bring a sense of reality back into the picture, not only as an inherited and evolving style of music-making, but also as a social force.

Several missions throughout Africa are now admitting the mental and spiritual value of initiation groups at this stage of African evolution and encourage their practice with, possibly, greater surgical skill in the physical detail. It now remains for the educational systems to study and adopt the intangibles which are to be found and demonstrated in indigenous music and song, both from the aesthetic angle and for the proper use of song in an African community as a social integrator and corrective.

It is a challenge which should be met by the Tswana people and their schools before the situation deteriorates still more and forces all their authentic folk compositions into an oblivion beyond their reach.

The tour itself lasted fron. October 5 to November 1, with two week-end breaks when the unit returned to Headquarters.

The first villages to be visited were the most easterly in the Rustenburg and Zeerust districts. It was here that the most disappointing results were obtained with the notable exception of one village, Saulspoort, where the Chief, Chief Pilane, and the headmaster of the local school, Mr. Dammi, were most helpful. Sixteen representative items were recorded, several among them reflecting events in the recent history of the local Kgatla tribe, their difficulties with the Ndebele invasion under Mzilikazi and others referring to local social events. One in particular drew a vivid picture, they said, of the old chief who welcomed the first Dutch Reformed Mission School shortly after the establishment of the Mission in their village in 1864. He would frequently visit the newly established school and speak to each child:

"How are you getting on with these lessons of yours, Monkey? Show them to me."
"Here they are, here they are."
"Show them to me."

The Chief to whom the song refers was most probably Chief Lentswe who succeeded his father Chief Kgamanyane in 1874.* The singers were not certain of his name and could not say for sure.

Several of the villages next visited had been involved in the fratricidal rioting of recent years which has in many cases split the local communities into two hostile camps. Many of the shells of burnt out houses remained as mute evidence of the bitterness of the disputes between the two factions. In the circumstances, with the animosities still smouldering beneath the surface, recording of their music was not in keeping with their present tempers and the tensions which clearly had not yet relaxed. In other villages inertia and indifference, so unlike the usual good nature of African people in most other Territories, were the root cause of our being unable to record any songs in spite of clear promises to do so given only two weeks previously. The bad manners and slovenly behaviour of the villagers and especially of the children in such places told their own story of social decline.

It was not until we arrived at Witkleigat and the Hurutshe people under Chief Edward Lencoe and those at Gopane and Motswedi that Tswana cheerfulness broke through. All three Hurutshe communities which live along the South African Bechuanaland border provided interesting and worth-

* "Tribes of the Rustenburg and Pilansberg Districts", P. L. Brent . . .p. 263.

while recordings in spite of the inclemency of the weather — a strong wind and high temperatures of over 100 degrees in the shade. Shade was at a premium everywhere, and the few trees which grow to any size in these drought stricken regions had not yet put out their new leaves.

Initiation and rain songs predominated as both were seasonal. In several villages the young men and women were still out in their respective initiation camps or had just returned from them, while the rains have been unusually late this season so that the common Tswana greeting of 'Pula' (Rain) had a special urgency.

Crossing over into the Bechuanaland Protectorate, we found the first village of Ramoutsa unprepared but arranged for a return visit on our way North.

The next two villages, that of Kanye, west of Lobatsi and Disaneng, west of Mafeking, proved to be by far the two best centres of Tswana music; at each place we were able to record over twenty items with the support of cheerful and pleasant crowds. Both chiefs and their local authority officials took personal interest in the recordings, the interpreters at each centre proving themselves unusually gifted. Chief Bathoen of Kanye has for many years demonstrated his interest in music and often taken a choir of his own townsmen and women to give concerts in other centres. His interest was reflected in the response of his people. Chief Mosebe of Disaneng while having no pretentions of being a musician admitted that he had no idea his people had so many songs. His secretary had prepared a written programme for the occasion, opening with prayers and hymns which lasted forty-five minutes followed by praise verses for the Chief and a set of speeches as well. This was followed by a long list of song titles with the names of those who were to perform them attached. This has only happened on three or four previous occasions in the whole of our African recording experience. The party was clearly enjoyed by all the villagers who by the end of the day were beginning to sing us some of their more rabelaisian ditties.

The two villages to the west of Disaneng, immediately south of the Bechuanaland border had little to offer except six unusually well sung initiation songs. A party of over sixty young men had just completed their period of isolation out in the veld and had returned home the previous day. They were still in their initiation garb, blankets or karosses over the shoulder, knobkerries or sticks in their hand and their skins smeared from head to foot with red. It used to be a red clay or red ochre, we were told, but now-a-days they use a commercial brand of red floor polish. The result left them with a bright rouge complexion which shone under the hot sunlight as if they were a men's chorus on the stage in some exotic play. Their initiation mentors, older members of the Rolong tribe, all carried long switches and it appears that flagellation is still a serious part of their manhood's initiation. The singing was the best we experienced from any Tswana group and the songs, as with so many initiation songs elsewhere, were highly idiomatic. We heard repeated references to 'the guineafowl' and the sharing out of the game after hunting, indicative they explained, of the customary good manners young men must learn to observe in showing respect to their elders in the community. The symbolism is not easily followed. One song sung they said while out in the veld ran . . .

"It is like pulling up carrots by hand.
To be a policeman is a battle with your hands.
Let me go and do it with our hands."

Another more significant, perhaps, of the present Tswana malaise was translated in these words . . .

"Chief Kegakilwe, the chieftainship is leaving us.
Ho! we are afraid of the Europeans.
We are afraid of their language.
The young men, all of us,
All are afraid of the Europeans.
Where shall we escape?"

Another more clearly associated with their entry into manhood was interpreted thus . . .

"Serago at home, child of the Jackal.
The shoe at home, child of the Jackal.
Let us go home,
Because we have died and vanished, never to return
The sound of the gun was heard
And the gun that was shooting was that of the Europeans."

It appears to be unusual for young African initiates to sing about Europeans on these occasions as their rites are as far as possible kept secret and entirely secluded. It has been suggested that the forcefulness of the white people constantly reminds them of the challenge to their manliness as they now have to live in a world the pace and activity of which is dictated by western criteria and can no longer be measured by individual prowess in minor tribal fighting or in hunting.

Our visit to these three villages west of Mafeking (pronounced locally Mahikeng, the place of stones) was memorable for the courtesy of Mr. G. Eloff, the local Agricultural Officer and his alert Zulu servant Georgie in escorting us for the three days and putting us up at the nearby Rest Huts on the trust farm

Louvain where we camped for two nights. His intimate knowledge of the people and the countryside from a life-long interest and participation in all the lore of the veld made him an ideal companion with an endless fund of autobiographical stories concerning the creatures of the country, while outside the huts the black coronne kept up their weird wailings and complaints to the stars all night long.

The next leg of our tour took us up through the Bechuanaland Protectorate again, the first engagement being a return to Ramoutsa and the Lete sub-tribe. What songs there were referred mostly to cattle and rain . . .

"Let there be gentle rain upon the earth
Clouds on earth
Rain on earth.
We are pierced by thorns.
Clouds on earth.
Herds of cattle bring themselves home."

Here they also produced an ensemble of flutes, a set of 19 single note, metal flutes played after the manner of bell-ringers, one man — one note. One of them stood in the centre of the ring of players and sang . . .

"Jone's mother weeps.
Where did he die, Jone?
He died when they were cattle raiding
And they killed him when he was following
The spoor of the cattle he captured."

then, after the fashion of so many African songs, the singer, switching to another subject, added . ..

"I refused you
So you hated me
And went away disappointed."

We took care to record the pitch of all nineteen pipes and measured their frequencies. They covered four octaves, with four intervals to each octave. The Pipes (or end blown flutes) are well primed with water before playing and their pitch is determined by a plug of cloth or other convenient material, rammed up or down from either end of the open pipe by a metal ramrod. We noted the tuning on our first visit and again three weeks later on our return, and found the tonic from which th y took their scale was not the same, on the second occasion being over a tone lower. The variations of pitch which can be produced from the same pipe by slightly differing methods of blowing, and the fact that several players changed the pitch of *their pipe during play if it did not* quite suit them, do not make a pipe ensemble the perfect basis for assessing Tswana modality. From the present evidence it is, however, clear that the true octave is recognised but neither the fourth nor the fifth. Much more evidence will have to be collected before any firm conclusions may be drawn.

The day was very hot at Ramoutsa, the shade scarce and the women who came to sing were kept waiting too long by the men with the result that the few interesting women's songs which they began to record for us were cut short all too soon and they dispersed back to the coolness of their homes.

From Gaberonnes we made two journeys, one to Mochudi and the other to Molepolole. Mochudi which is picturesquely situated beneath a ridge of dark sepia rocks was held out as being the most likely place for good Tswana music of the Kgatla sub-tribe. Men had been singing all night, we were told, in preparation for a presentation to the Chief of the skin of a lion recently killed at one of their cattle posts, following traditional custom.

We arrived in time to see the band of thirty or forty men dance up to the Kgotla, meeting place, the lion's skin draped over the back and head of the successful hunter who was accompanied by four others wearing the skins of the often more dangerous leopard. We managed to record both their songs and a praise verse to the Chief after which the people vanished in the direction in which they expected chieftainly bounty in the form of beer and food, complaining that they had had positively nothing since last night. They sat in the shade of a tree outside the Chief's house and could not be deflected from their objective nor, out of a population of several thousand people could a single woman or group of women be persuaded to take an interest in music, in recording their own voices or in listening to other Tswana recordings in spite of the very kind endeavours of the officials and others.

Molepolole, the large settlement almost on the edge of the Kalahari desert, was more co-operative and in spite of the searing heat and strong wind, a few men sang us their old initiation songs. One referred to flagellation . . .

"They thrash skins early in the morning,
With the mark of stripes on their backs"

and another with a disarmingly honest remark in the last line ran:

"We come from where we have killed
Oh, the grey head! We-e!
We praise our leader.

We come from the place where we have killed.
Once we killed the people of the Kalahari . . .
We killed them
and they killed us!"

This was the last we would hear of Tswana songs on this tour as a message from Serowe, the Capital of the Northern Division, had reached us making it clear that they considered our objective in recording Tswana songs was to expose their 'backwardness', an attitude which had the merit of being both novel and unique in our experience. In order to find out for ourselves how representative this statement might be we went north to Serowe the following day. There, with the assistance of a most outstanding member of the Education Department, Miss Chiepe, herself a Tswana of the Ngwato group, we discovered that the surface resistance did in fact hide a folk music which was still in use and could very well be recorded with the active co-operation of the more mature African people and officials. As this was patently lacking at the present time there was no object in prolonging the tour and we left Serowe with the promise of our returning as soon as there was a genuine sign on the part of the community of wishing to treasure their musical heritage.

That night we slept at the small hotel near the Palapye railway station and were awakened at three o'clock in the morning by shouts that the hotel was on fire. We got out in our pyjamas with only a few minutes in hand to fling together our clothes before our rooms were ablaze. After doing what we could to help, we left for home at a quarter to four, in the dark in more ways than one, a somewhat wry end to a disappointing tour.

From this brief encounter with the Tswana group of tribes, one must conclude that African music is not likely to flourish among them in the near future for several reasons which we have found to be valid elsewhere:—

(1) Their recent history has been one of strife ever since the raiding hordes of the Zulu Captain, Mzilikazi, entered their territory from Natal. Their young men were often slaughtered and the women and children absorbed into the Ndebele system. Remnants of the sub-tribes were left to carry on as best they might after the gradual retreat of Mzilikazi before Dingaan and the Boers between 1825 and 1840 when they were finally driven north.

(2) Constant migrations of some of the sub-tribes across the country between Basutoland and the Kalahari with the inevitable tribal fighting had an unsettling effect which must have been aggravated by the settlement of the whites after the foundation of Rustenburg in 1839, and still more so by the discovery of gold on the Rand in 1886. This upheaval throughout the Nineteenth Century would have tended, no doubt, to weaken the traditional prides and thus the traditional songs.

(3) The multiplicity of dialects, a dozen of which are still officially recognised, which may have limited their songs to the boundaries of small groups with few melodies achieving more than local currency.

(4) The early appearance of evangelical missions with their fervour for hymn singing and strict disapproval of 'heathen' African songs would have played havoc with an already weak musical heritage, a tendency which a serious lack of any effective indigenous musical instruments would have failed to reverse.

(5) The present unrealistic curricula for teaching music in schools; —and—

(6) Lastly, there is the undermining of community sanctions by their participation in the industrial revolution of Southern Africa and the extensive infiltration of outside African blood which makes many of the present generation Tswana in name only. The history of violent tribal rapine in the early part of the nineteenth century is repeating itself in the dilution of Tswana blood by peaceful promiscuity in the twentieth.

One is forced to the conclusion that music may never have been the major cultural outlet of Tswana folk however neglected it may have been as a social force during the last hundred years.

The impression we gained of these turbulent, reticent people who reserve their special skills especially for their buildings and in the design of the courtyards of their homes rather than for their music, is but a distant echo of an account by the Rev. Robert Moffat, Livingstone's father-in-law, who in 1829 wrote:*

"The remains of some of the houses which escaped the flames of the marauders were large and showed a far superior style and taste to anything I had before witnessed."

The structure of Tswana society is changing with the times and to adjust themselves satisfactorily they will certainly need all their resources, the wisdom of their poets and minstrels not the least.

* Ibid . . . p. 11. Quoted from Matabele Journals, Vol. I, p. 8.

Number of songs recorded in each Tswana dialect:—

Hurutshe	37
Kgatla	30
Tlharo	22
Ngwaketse	21
Lete	14
Rolong	11
Kwena	10
	145

Types of song recorded on the Tswana Tour:—

1.	Initiation songs (both male and female)	30
2.	Praise verses and song	22
3.	Dance songs	15
4.	Rain Songs	11
5.	Wedding songs	10
6.	Work songs (agricultural and domestic)	9
7.	Children's lullabies and games	7
8.	Hunting songs	6
9.	Pipe ensembles (without words)	4
10.	Fighting songs (tribal wars)	4
11.	Stories	4
12.	Greeting songs for a chief	3
13.	Drinking songs	3
14.	Topical songs	3
15.	Party songs	3
16.	Self delectative (instrumental)	2
17.	Guessing game	1
18.	First fruits ceremony	1
19.	Morality song	1
20.	Cattle raiding song	1
21.	Humorous song	1
22.	Greeting song	1
23.	Walking song	1
24.	Sketch (impromptu)	1
25.	Riddles	1
	Total	145