BASUTOLAND RECORDING TOUR

November 19th to December 3rd, 1959

Each territory in which the Library records examples of indigenous music presents its own characteristics and its own propositions. Both demand special consideration and understanding. For the short period in which the recording unit is active in the country of the tribes concerned we live intensely in the atmosphere of local society, ruler and ruled, teacher and taught, each with their special contemporary problems, the more so because the nature of our research gives us a background of similar conditions from other regions where we have been to collect music.

Basutoland was no exception, although in view of the forthcoming constitutional changes it was not surprising to find that local conversation was pre-occupied with the political situation rather than the cultural. These foreground matters, however, must not obscure the background out of which they have arisen.

The visitor to Basutoland, suitably forearmed with Hugh Ashton's classic work on the Sotho, is immediately impressed with the rugged nature of the country, its great ranges of mountains which sharply divide the land into isolated districts, the lack of highways which make the interior almost inaccessible and familiar only to those on horseback, and the distinctive appearance of the Sotho people themselves whose customs in many respects reflect their environment. The silhouette of the blanket-swathed rider on his narrow, tripling cob with his conical grass-woven hat, is the hieroglyph which spells 'Basutoland' to the tourist.

Like their relatives the Tswana, with whom they share many attributes including a basically common language, they construct the most sturdy of all African dwellings. The presence of an abundant supply of easily worked sandstone has developed the craft of stone masonry among them which is not surpassed elsewhere in Africa, and adds an architectural feature to their villages far more substantial than the normal run of African huts.

An interesting facet of their buildings is the arched porch which is found in many of their more traditional round huts, the rectangular stone houses being copied from those of the Europeans, mostly the early Boers who first taught them the craft. The two sides of the arch are formed by tying at their tips bundles of tapering reeds which may afterwards be plastered with mud and decorated with coloured clays.

Some of these porches are from ten to fifteen feet in depth in front of the single door, the thick thatch of the roof spreading itself out like a broody hen to cover both the hut and the porch. It is an attractive design the more so when one remembers that the Sotho people claim to have come from *Ntsuanatsatsi*, a place of reeds, and that the only similar construction of huts with reed porches, in my experience, are to be found in the vicinity of the great lakes, more especially among the Haya and Ganda to the West of Lake Victoria Nyanza in both Tanganyika and Uganda. Those huts which our Sotho informants told us were their oldest and most traditional types had grass thatching right down to the ground with almost no walls at all. This method of construction is typical of Hima huts in that far distant part of central Africa and makes one wonder what direct connection there might be between the two regions which are over 2,500 miles apart. Nowhere in the country between have we seen similarly constructed porches. It may, of course, be purely coincidental, but, on the other hand, it may well support the Sotho legend of their origin in *Ntsuanatsatsi*.

Similar indications of a tribe's oral history are frequently found in song and no doubt exist in Basutoland if there are any who can still interpret them. This is a work which must ultimately be left to the more intellectual and introspective among them, though it must be admitted that, from all accounts, the promise of interest in their own folklore which M. Jacottet of the Paris Evangelical Mission had noted in 1908 in the introduction to his collection of Sotho stories (The Treasury of Ba-Suto Lore. E. Jacottet. p. xxi) has not been realised, in fact the reverse. Mr. E. S. Mohapi, the acting headmaster of the Leribe school who was largely responsible for the preliminary arrangements for our recording tour, reported that several of his more educated acquaintances had responded with supercilious surprise when he told them he was arranging for recordings of authentic Sotho music.

The visitor to Basutoland is quickly made aware that it is not only the great mountain ridges which divide the country, the most serious cleavages, perhaps, being the bitter divisions between the various Christian communities, and the wide gulf between the white collar class and the bulk of their own countrymen. It has been popular, it appears, to profess ignorance of all Sotho country music as a sign of grace and emancipation. Several members of this persuasion we noticed grow their finger nails half an inch or more beyond the tips of the fingers to emphasize their intellectual gifts and their remoteness from the sons of toil.

The economy of the country is almost exclusively agricultural while the pressure of population every year sends over 100,000 able-bodied men 'over the river' into the Union of South Africa for work in the industries and farms and especially in the mines where they shine as rock-breaking and development teams underground. The social stresses which must inevitably arise from the absence of so large a pro-

portion of the half-million inhabitants are reflected in song but do not seem to be as acutely felt by the Sotho as by the tribesmen of Moçambique or, in a different degree, by the Tswana of the Western Transvaal. A large number of young boys may be seen doing men's work ploughing the fields with their oxen or donkeys at this time of year with the beginning of the rains, but in spite of this, attendance at school in Basutoland is said to be among the highest in Africa; indeed, it is often claimed that the Sotho are the best educated of all African Bantu tribes.

It is against this background and into this environment that our Library recording team entered Basutoland to collect songs from seven typical villages in the western or lowland region of the country from Teyateyaneng in the north to Mafeteng in the south . . . It was the lace curtain of natural Sotho aloofness which had to be penetrated before songs could be recorded.

The niceties of etiquette when approaching the head of a village are still much in evidence, a relic perhaps of the nineteenth century and the pervading fragrance of the 'good old Queen', Victoria of course, which still lingers in the 'camps' (towns), along the bridle paths and on the verandahs of most administrative offices and residences with their once natty, ogee curved, iron canopies.

The ammoniac atmosphere of horses, long since vanished elsewhere, constantly reminds one that time has dismounted and would need to canter to catch up with the twentieth century if ever it showed the inclination. It is still a life on horseback; and rightly so, since the girth of a horse has so much better a clearance than the sump and bumpers of a modern car for which few of the rocky tracks to the villages have been evolved, one can hardly say 'engineered'.

Here, among the dramatic pastel pinks, greens and distant powder blues of their bold landscape, we found the same vitality in Sotho folk music and the same rapturous participation in the dance that is common to the whole Continent, a reality that cannot be ignored however much it may be attacked or despised by cleric or class. One village headman told us, with what truth we cannot judge, that the local priest had threatened him with excommunication if they recorded their 'heathen' music. To which information another priest remarked: "We have but one Pope, but every now and again we find a few little popes."

A well-known local Sotho composer with considerable success to his name in the 'thirties' excused his mishandling of the rules of Sotho verse, its stress and tone, in his recent hybrid compositions by saying that if he composed correctly without semantic distortion it would be considered 'heathen music' by his friends.

A missionary who has wide experience of several African territories in addition to Basutoland said that, as far as he knew, not a single European or educated Sotho within the territory had any but a casual knowledge of contemporary Sotho music or evinced any interest in directing this powerful indigenous talent towards useful social ends.

There is a certain danger of the middle classes, white and black alike, becoming out of touch with the social reality of the territory as expressed in normal Sotho recreations, the white because they seem unable to cross the sound barrier into African idiom and remain outside as casual or hostile observers and not participants; the blacks because they are seriously involved in the creation of their own esoteric caste and are most anxious not to be contaminated by their less sophisticated relatives. This is not unique to Basutoland, but only more clearly observable as they have travelled the school road for longer than most Africans, and their ideal social pattern is what they imagine the white middle class to be. They use all the old clichés which hide their fear of being 'driven back to a primitive state' to support their bourgeois ambitions. In this they share the same outlook as so many American Negroes.

A glance across the Atlantic gives us a template of what is happening over there and might well happen locally. As in the States, the white teacher or missionary is concerned with making men, the African with making money and the display of spending it, as Frazier has so well demonstrated with reference to his own Negro people.* He might have added the attraction of acquiring political force regardless of an adequate economic backing.

Over a century of devoted idealism has been expended upon Basutoland in evangelical endeavour and almost as many years dedicated to kindly administrative protection. The Sotho, like several other African people, have been made the pets of the western approach to African uplift and we were given the impression that their reversion to stark magic in recent years has deeply wounded and bewildered their mentors.

If the state of music as we found it in the villages of Basutoland is any guide, it would appear most necessary for a number of open-minded and sensitive people among both communities to study what really does happen when they sing and dance, and to forget for a while the irrational ideal that all civilised African men should aim exclusively at singing Handel's Messiah or a Latin Mass. The former will be a constructive piece of sociology, the latter will add nothing to our knowledge and little to our vanity.

Our Library, it will be noted, is not concerned with politics but it must observe and remark upon the social conditions reflected in African songs which may be the outcome of politics.

We were able to visit seven villages through the kindness and invitation of the administration.

* 'Black Bourgeoisie'. E. Franklin Frazier. Falcon's Wing Press, Illinois.

Seventy-three items in all were recorded, an average of ten a village. This is the list of the types of song, all of which appear to be truly indigenous, though a few draw their inspiration from an adjoining territory, the Transkei:—

Types of Indigenous Sotho Songs recorded by the I.L.A.M.:

Dance Songs	16.	(Including men's striding dances and women's kneeling dances)
Riding Songs	16.	(Most of these include long Lithoko praises)
Men's Initiation Songs	9.	
Women's Initiation Songs	9	
Divining Songs	7	
Work Songs	6	(Including hoeing, grinding and braying songs)
Self delectative songs	3	
Praise verses	3	(*Lithoko* — without accompanying songs)
Mouse hunting songs	2	
Party songs	2	
Lullaby	1	
Singing games	1	
Instrumental music	1	
Step dance	1	
Total	76	items

From this list it will be seen that dancing and riding songs are the two main musical activities. Of the two I would place the deep-voiced riding songs with their accompanying praises as the prime musical passion of Sotho men. They delight in singing their deep pitched songs or Mokorotlo as the name implies.

They are manly songs and, when sung standing, are often accompanied by a stately swaying and firm stamping of the feet as befits the portly stature of so many of the men. Without previous warning, anyone in the group may break into the song and recite verses about his Chief, his friends, his cattle or himself, no subject seems to come amiss. The rest stand entranced at the flow of well strung words and if the praise is well known as so many of them are, several can be seen moving their lips unconsciously in unison with those of the reciter. The end of a praise verse may also end the song but, as often as not, someone else will start the song again or break into a new one which in turn will be broken off by yet another praise. A string of songs and praises may last between ten and fifteen minutes and in fact there seems little reason for them to end but continue indefinitely.

It is notable that the people of Basutoland, in spite of their dividing mountains, appear to share the same songs throughout the whole country, villagers from the east of the Drakensberg knowing and singing the songs of the Caledon, as we have discovered by practical experience. Admittedly the basic style of *Mohobelo* chorus singing is stereotyped but local variations are provided by the sole singer or chantyman. This has the great advantage of allowing any individual free choice of subject and originality in his solo while being certain of common response from his fellows who sing the choruses with him wherever he may be in Sotho company.

Apart from the rich quality of many Sotho bass voices which everyone can appreciate, it is likely that only the Sotho who treasure their language can be good judges of the aesthetic virtue of these songs and praises in the same way as the English must ultimately be the final judges of Shakespeare or Chaucer.

These are the translations of a few passages from their recorded *Mokorotlo*, as outlined for us by E. S. Mohapi . . .

Oh, the young men of Lerotholis' place are dark and
are called 'horse-eaters'.
Your guns are used for pidgeon shooting and your spears
for hunting mice.
Let Mpaleng's father speak.
Your child looks like its father,
Your child looks like its uncle,
While I resemble Mokehle of Mokoalibe
Dun coloured like a cow with long teats,
Dun coloured and milked by women.
The child of Seforo's wife is the one
Who provided a bachelor with a bed.

(N2E-12)
Machekoaneng
Maseru District.

What do you say when an ox is wild?
Ah, you are weeping.
Look quickly Motloheloa's child and reply to Nkhooa.
We had better keep quiet
For people at Koali's do not speak.
Man does not make rain,
Rain is made by God alone.
I had better keep quiet,
But if I keep quiet I'll shut out the guests.

(N2G-1)
Mokoroane
Mohale's Hoek District.

* * *

This language I speak
You speak without knowing it.
You know me to-day,
In the battle of tongues I should have been a lawyer,
The language which is widely understood.

You should have made holes in the mountain
So that I could go inside and see the country
between Natal and 'Aooeng'*
And the land between Makeleketla (Winburg) and
Manganeng (Bloemfontein).

(N2A-4)
Mamathe
Berea District.

* * *

A Song before Riding:

Where does the Chief want us to go to-day?
To leave in the evening when it is cold
With a drizzle of rain like a mist,
With the lads afraid of mounting their horses.
Our saddles will be wet
And our trousers creased.
By Morake's child, I will curse somebody!

We, of the Tau family are one handed.
We receive food with it and feel pleased.
We kill our own monkeys at Matsau-tsau.

Where did they see him?
They saw him in the sugar-cane fields.
What does he say he wants, Sotho?
He says he wants a Sotho blanket.
Jump on my back and away we go.
You men, let us go.

(N2G-7)
Mokoroane
Mohale's Hoek District

* * *

The dance songs of Africa are generally short and to the point as their main function is to provide a simple melody and ground rhythm for the various dance routines and, in any case, Sotho dancers are not concerned with the sense of the words but with the delight of moving together in unison, hissing their accompaniment to the sinuous movements of the *Mohobelo* dance.

Basutoland is my fatherland,
At Bushman's Nek, near Machacha, in the mountains.
I joined up for work on the mines,
But when I arrived I found myself in trouble.
I was with Molelekoa, son of Smith.
So I crossed the Vaal very early in the morning
That was when I was nearly swept down with the river.
Perhaps it was because I was running away,

* The Eastern Free State where they pronounce their words like 'Aooeng'.

Running away and leaving my passes on the veld.
I left mine in the western Transvaal,
I left both my pass and my tax receipt!

(N2E-6)
Machekoaneng
Maseru District.

* * *

When you want to marry
Chose a wife for yourself
Do not blame anyone for choosing one for you.
They refuse to cross the Vaal.

(N2E-12)
Machekoaneng
Maseru District.

* * *

Women's dance songs are often more subtle and may be filled with local scandal or gossip, or with such things as the sorrows of a death in the family circle. They dance, these Sotho women, on their knees, shaking their shoulders in time with the song and alternately raising and lowering their bodies in their *Mokhibo* dance.

Taung, the place of Moletsane, my home!
If I speak I shall cause sorrow
For some would remember sad things
And I would be bringing back the dead.

Women on the Rand are like vagrants,
They wear shoes without stockings!

You can see our mountains in Basutoland.
The hawk which nests on the cliff at Ramalile
Catches the chickens when they go out to feed.

(N2G-11)
Mokoroane
Mohale's Hoek District.

* * *

Who will bring Mamosi down?
'Municipality' is the wizard of the whites.
He has brought the railway train into Naesifili.
At my home at Majara, Leshoboro's place,
Smoke drifts far away out in the veld.

I have no chief, I am ruled by a woman.
Mother Mantsala, give me food.
When horses race for prizes
Yours run for nothing.
My family is disappointed with Matseliso.
It does not like people who cover their heads with cloth.
I have not come here just to see you,
I have come to condole with you.

(N2C-6)
Mauteng
Maseru District.

The 'Municipality' they explained is looked upon as a single person, a person of wealth who can do things rather like the Government.

* * *

Helele, Masupha!
What do you people say I should do at home?
Masupha says we should bear children promiscuously.
Masupha has allowed us.
The sling is strangling the baby.

A hen never goes after a cock,
But the hens at Kolo seem to be calling the cocks!

Perhaps I might go to Linoheng
Where the Chief's son Tumahole stays.
Chief Habofane says so
The Chief of Linoheng.

(N2B-10)
Koali
Berea District.

Here we see a glimpse of the problem of the menfolk who are away in the mines.

* * *

Let them gallop, girls, let them gallop!
I will not leave my child behind.

Donki is as close to me as my belt.
Donki is the belt which I tie around my waist.

The Semani people have released me so I can go away
They have allowed me to take my children and go.
I am not afraid of tying up my blankets and going.

(She sings to the others . . .

"Girls, you are not backing me up
You sound half-hearted.")

I am in the care of a Christian woman.
If I have had a meal at the chief's place it is enough.
I do not like food given to me by common people."

(N2C-5)
Mauteng
Maseru District.

* * *

The *Lengae* the initiation songs of the young men and the *Lelingoana*, the initiation songs of young girls as one would expect, are full of abstruse symbolism and are not easy to follow unless one is well acquainted with the local scene. This is a simple *Lengae* from Tebang village.

When you go to Lako
Leave your blanket pin behind.
The girls at Lako will pin your blanket for you.
They wear green head scarves which become them."

(N2F-6)
Tebang
Mafeteng District.

* * *

A song sung to us by a group of ash covered girls through their bead decorated grassmasks which made them completely anonymous is an interesting example of a *Lelingoana*. Thet beat their hands on their sheepskin aprons as they sang . . .

I want to write to my brother, Lethula,
To come and see this cruel act
Perpetrated upon his mother's child
Who has gone around Kolo mountain five times
Looking for a woman's charm.

She has seen it to-day.

Women are hard-hearted.
They will not initiate a decent person,
They initiate orphans,
An orphan who hast lost her mother,
Whom death has inbued with courage.
Losing one's parents is painful.

I should have had an uncle
Who would have given me a goat
To give to the 'water-man',
To please the 'water-man'
So that he would return to the water.

(N2G-4)
Mokoroane
Mohale's Hoek District.

* * *

A *Thojane* song which is sung by the men when they welcome the young women back home from their initiation school was translated . . .

The girl will marry into the chief's family.
This peace!
Cows produce good milk.
We, friends of Lesenyeho's brother, Tau,
We of Phakoe's family speak well.
Mother witches, you will not allow us your leather aprons.
My child will soon marry into the chief's family
My Molichi!

There is fighting . . .
Where is it where there is no fighting?
Even at Maseru there is fighting!

(N2G-9)
Mokoroane
Mohale's Hoek District.

* * *

An unusual song with a reference to the disaster which occurred in 1957 around the mountain Thaba Bosio when a hurricane blew away the roof of a church and destroyed many homes in the region, was also described as an initiation song.

It is burning;
An island is burning;
Thaba Bosio is burning.
At the pass there are flames.
Thaba Bosio is burning.

You will burn and burst into flames, you witches.
You have left the Son of God out on the veld,
You will have to go back and fetch Him.
The island is burning.

(N2E-10)
Machekoaneng
Maseru District.

* * *

Divining songs were not at all clear to the interpreters and much of their imagery would have to be studied by a psycho-analyst to produce an understandable philosophy which must underlie them. One of them referred to 'an angry water snake which came out of the east' while another, sung by the widow of a soldier who had been killed up north during the last war referred, in part, more to her personal loss than to any divination proceeding . . .

Death is painful.
My husband has remained in Egypt.
He is sitting in the water.
He is eaten by crabs.
I did not know that that would be his fate.
Pako, my child, is weeping.

(N2D-3)
Upper Qeme
Maseru District.

* * *

The fact that Sotho in common with most South African tribes have few effective musical instruments greatly limits the output of songs. The sound of the herd-boys *lesiba*, that unique wind-blown stringed instrument only found among the Sotho, does not lend itself to the composition of lyrics although in many other places herdboys are the most prolific singers. In spite of this drawback it may

still be called the national instrument of the Sotho and they are fascinated by its eerie humming sounds to which those standing around will whistle a kind of roller canary trill. Sometimes an harmonica will replace it, and in the example we discovered at Mamathe's village the player also sang varses interspersed with the music of his mouth organ. This is one of them . . .

Get out of the way,
Do not be frightened by gossip, girls.
Gossip is always a storm in a village.
Do not change your abode just because somebody
says he loves you.
You will find people like that wherever you go.
A woman is a dog for whom everybody wants to die.

(N2A-5)
Mamathe
Berea District.

He was not intending to insult the young woman by comparing her with a dog but placing her on the same pedestal as his faithful friend.

* * *

Wherever Catholicism has penetrated into the less sophisticated societies, it has been reported by a number of writers and in our own experience as well that Catholic symbols have often been adopted for magical ends. It was, therefore, not surprising that the local diviners in one of the Sotho villages we visited were using rosaries with their other charms, but we did not expect to find mention of them in a 'mouse hunting' song!

Although we found a few references to the long lost local lion ("Far down, lions are roaring. What are they eating that causes them to roar so? They are eating insects," as, no doubt, they would under such indignities) and to the mythical but non-existent heraldic crocodile, it is a sorry reflection upon the state of the fauna in the country that their young men have been reduced to hunting mice. There are two varieties of mouse-hunting song, they told us; one for the plain mice and one for the striped. This is for a plain mouse hunt . . .

Look at this crow,
It is wearing a chain
And takes it for a rosary.
The rosaries are finished
They have all been given to the school-children
Help us, Mother of God,
Give us a rosary.
Haol hael The rosaries are finished.

(N2B-15)
Kaoli
Berea District.

There were few songs we recorded in the south which did not end with a hearty ribald "Amen" and quite a few with an "Ave Maria" also.

* * *

The Sotho, we found, strangely silent at their work and only six domestic and agricultural work songs were offered us. This is the typical song of a Sotho woman whose man is away and might have been the lament of any peasant woman in similar circumstances the world over . . .

Far, far away at Molelle's place,
Where is the train going?
He has been away at the mines too long.
I, poor child, always say that.
I have lost my relatives
And have no one to tell me what to do."

(N2D-4)
Upper Qeme
Maseru District.

* * *

It is songs like these which, all over Africa, are doing their community work, the people singing about themselves, scolding and comforting, criticising and encouraging; laughing and teasing each other, lamenting for the departures and cheering for the returns which help to make sense of their lives and act as the cement which binds their society together in their family and village gatherings.

It would, we feel, be folly to connive at their destruction, only to make room for the solemn melodies of the class rooms which, like the falcons of Thaba Ramalile, swoop down to despoil their homely chickens from the Parnassian heights of Standard Six.

HUGH TRACEY
Director I.L.A.M.