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On the Trail of the Music Hunter: A Semester with the Laura Boulton
Collection

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It has proved an interesting and challenging experience working on someone else's field collections- though not an entirely new one, for in my work at the School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh) as editor of the School's Scottish Tradition series of discs and cassettes, I was frequently working with the recordings of earlier fieldworkers. It was interesting because I was able to acquaint myself with the sound of much music in a different part of Africa from that best known to me, and challenging because of the nature of the documentation of this part of the Laura Boulton Collection. I was also interested to learn just how much one can learn working with the products of someone else's fieldwork.

Anthony Seeger, a former director of the Archives of Traditional Music, once gave two principal reasons for ethnomusicological use of earlier archive collections: for preliminary study, or for posterior generalization, and I suppose my approach fell into both categories of use.

My particular research interest was to look amongst the results of Dr. Laura Boulton's field expeditions to Angola and South West Africa, now known as Namibia, and to explore the nature of any music for stopped flute ensemble (either panpipes, or ensembles of single-note instruments such as are known in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa). There proved to be few examples of this music, but those few were extremely interesting both for musical reasons and because of their rarity as recordings.

During her 1947-48 expedition, Dr. Boulton came across two groups of musicians of the Nama people, a sub-group of the Khoisan peoples formerly called Hottentots, living in the Namib desert. Their music provided excellent material for comparison with other stopped flute ensembles and with panpiping traditions in other parts of Africa.

I knew only little about the flute ensemble styles of southwest Africa. In fact, some preliminary reading taught me that few scholars had written anything but the most shadowy descriptions of such performances. Percival Kirby had studied and transcribed performance of similar ensembles in South Africa and Bechuanaland, but had never heard the flute playing of peoples further west. In

one sense then this would be a preliminary study, but it was also to be comparative for I had recorded music for such flutes in Uganda in the 1960s, and could also draw on the reports of other researchers with a view to refining a more general theory of musical composition in sub-Saharan Africa.

Problems soon became apparent. Over the years Dr. Boulton had conceived a variety of publication projects for her Angolan and southern Africa materials, resulting in numerous different indexes in various stages of incompleteness, for no one project ever matured. The problem of locating items was compounded by her decision to separate out the recordings made in central Angola from the other recordings made during a major expedition which began in South Africa and took her into South West Africa and Angola and back during the period of September 1947 to January 1948.

This expedition was a cooperative venture by staff of UCLA, and among others who participated for all or part of the expedition were Charles Camp and Edwin Loeb, the latter an anthropologist who had done work among the Ovambo-Kuanyama people living around the border of Angola and present-day Namibia. The expedition consisted of four self-contained units: zoology and botany, anthropology, paleontology and music.

Traveling was done with the use of trucks and large cars provided by General Motors, and at one point a donkey train also helped in transporting supplies and occasionally in dragging the motorized vehicles out of sand dunes in the Namib desert. The Shell Corporation supplied gas and oil, the U.S. Army provided camping equipment, and the U.S. Navy supplied cameras and Kodachrome film. It must have been a gruelling trip at times. What few roads they could use were deeply rutted-often there were none-and all the time the heat was intense for it was mid-summer in the southern hemisphere.

My first problem was to locate any flute recordings among her tapes. I had a good idea that they existed, for several passages in Laura Boulton's autobiography, *The Music Hunter*, had mentioned them. As a preliminary it was essential to establish a chronology for her collecting work during that expedition. The most recently prepared catalogues suggested that her Angola recordings had followed on from those in South West Africa and were quite separate, but it later emerged that they had been sandwiched in between her collecting in South West Africa and South Africa. To establish her itinerary involved consulting not only the various indexes, but also *The Music Hunter* and a huge bulk of undated drafts for other books, as well as fragments of unpublished articles and talks on her collecting work. Not all these accounts agree with one another and a considerable amount of artistic license was taken as Dr. Boulton wrote and rewrote different accounts with different readers and audiences in mind.

One account mentioned that she had recorded some flute dances on New Year's Eve while waiting at Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa, for the necessary papers that would enable the party to continue its journey north through the Namib desert, where the Nama peoples lived, towards the Angolan border. In fact, this account proved misleading, for by that time the party had already spent two months in the field, working for some time up on the border and documenting a ritual known as *efundula*, in which the participants were Kuanyama girls of marriageable age at a kraal in Ovamboland. Laura Boulton herself had subsequently completed a fairly full recording schedule at a number of different mission stations in central Angola.

It turned out that during mid-December on the return journey south after leaving Ovamboland, the party crossed the Etosha salt pan on the edge of the Namib desert and headed southwest through Otavi and Outjo to a small Nama reserve near Fransfontein. If they were looking especially for bands of flute-playing Nama they were disappointed, for in one account she records, "No one knew how to make and play the flutes except four tottering old men." In *The Music Hunter* she devotes some considerable space to the Nama, who were at that time called Hottentots—a name which seems to be coined from derisive imitations of the sound of their click language.

“Occasionally along our route we had seen Hottentots, but in Windhoek we observed this interesting tribe at close range. The Hottentots have yellowish skin, peppercorn hair growing in tufts, little triangular faces, small delicate hands and feet, and very protuberant buttocks which in the women are considered a sign of beauty. The tribe came from the south sometime after the Herero arrived from the north (about A.D. 1550), and for years they fought each other but later united in guerilla warfare against the Germans. Today the Herero and Hottentots seem quite compatible and even intermarry.

The reed-flute orchestras of the Hottentots provided some of the most interesting music I recorded in South West Africa. Their flutes were the first instruments described by travelers to South Africa. As early as 1497, Vasco de Gama told of being entertained by a huge band of Hottentots playing flutes, and in 1661 a Dutch explorer described bands of one and two hundred musicians each with a hollow reed flute dancing in a great circle, playing "in harmony" their one-toned instruments.

The huge orchestras of those days have dwindled to small groups of five to nine. The ones I recorded had seven players, and every flute had a different tone. Each musician played the single tone for which he was responsible with enormous pride. The band made up what you might call a living pipe organ, each pipe of which was played by a different person. The sounds produced resembled those of the circus calliope, but the performance was perfect.

The dances were always circle dances such as the Dutch writer described in the seventeenth century. In the center of the circle there was a leader, and around him danced a circle of women singing and clapping. The flute players danced in the outer circle. Each song had its own action as well as text, and the dancing was highly dramatic. The reed flute dances were royal performances held by the commander-in-chief.” (*The Music Hunter*, 142-143.)

Eventually Dr. Boulton's recordings were identified along with some sketchy indexing. There turned out to be two sets of flute ensembles recorded at different times. The first group at Fransfontein, however, seemed to have more than the four players mentioned in one account, but not the seven mentioned in the other. It turned out to be delightful music, notwithstanding the poor quality of the recordings. Her disc recorder was continually troubled

by speed problems: indeed one wonders that it was still functioning at all after several months in that harsh, dusty climate.

The Nama had for long intermarried with Dutch and German settlers and their music sounds like it is derived from phrases of South African pop songs with a chordal ostinato similar to the guitar chord schemes of South African town musicians. Photographs in the collection show the women dressed in long sleeved dresses with bonnets and with a distinctly Dutch air about them. But how many players were there? On the recordings one can hear seven different flute pitches. Fortunately, one can be reasonably sure of the answer through one piece of evidence in the collection: a short length of silent film. This was a piece of luck. The film could easily never have existed, for among the few surviving scraps of field jottings from that expedition is a draft for telegrams dispatched by Laura Boulton from Ondangua on the border between Angola and Namibia saying, "Wonderful people here Fascinating customs Must have as much Kodachrome as possible. What about Pretoria supplies of film?" This was sent to several contacts in Windhoek and Johannesburg. The response in one cabled reply sent to her on 24 October 1947 reads "Kodaks regret no such films procurable at present and further supplies uncertain."

Laura Boulton had been unable to bring a photographer with her on this trip and she shot most of the film herself. She was not a good photographer, but she had obviously saved up some film for such an encounter and from the short clip one can see that the players consisted of five men, with at least one holding and blowing more than one flute, while the women danced around them singing gaily. Kirby and others had documented the fact that in some ensembles of this kind it was quite usual for more than one of the higher pitch flutes to be played by one musician. Despite the fact that a short pattern (transcribed as four bars) is played over and over again for several minutes, the performances contained constant variation making a blend of European harmonies with African interlocking rhythms.

Recorded at Fransfontein by Laura Boulton. Eighth cycle of the tune.

♩ = 104 approx.

Voices in heterophony.

Flutes 1 & 2.

Flutes 3 & 4.

Flutes 5 - 7.

The second set of recordings raised quite another problem, for her discussion of the Nama flute ensembles had concluded with the following:

“Apparently these reed-flute ensembles antedate the panpipes. Though they were performed always in harmony, the Hottentots never reached the stage of joining several flutes together to be played by one performer as is the case with panpipes.”

One might digress at this point into a critical discussion about such outdated evolutionist concepts, but one only has to listen to this second set of recordings to conclude that the anonymous musicians were probably the four men Dr. Boulton mentioned. Though "tottering" they might have been (there are no photographs or cine film of these men, and neither do we know where the recording was made), they were clearly expert musicians each playing on more than one flute. Perhaps the flutes were "rafted" together to form panpipes but it is equally possible that the flutes were kept singly so that more than four players could participate if wished. In such cases it would clearly be undesirable to bind them together to make a smaller number of composite instruments, and it is worth noting that in other areas of sub-Saharan Africa where stopped flute ensembles occur, the music seems specifically designed to involve the participation of the maximum number of players. This is clearly for social reasons, for such flute dances, in addition to being joyful events for the whole community - be it the extended family, clan or village - served also to reaffirm one's sense of belonging to a community, and all the men of the community were expected to take part, young and old alike.

The second group's "panpipe" music is again a blend of European and African elements. Its European-ness might surprise one initially, but one needs to remember that this area is very thinly populated, with small groups of Nama settled mostly at sites with a permanent water supply. As a result, mission stations, mining projects and cattle ranches were also established. In such places the degree of intermarriage which took place between white incomers and local Africans had proved to be a prime factor in the development of apartheid notions in southern Africa. Here, too, a single enthusiastic missionary could radically alter the music making habits of his or her small flock.

The four players lock their parts together in beautifully precise rhythm to sound like a sprightly chamber organ or like a small Germanic brass ensemble playing a lively march for some village festivity. But African features also endure. Although a transcription of a short section illustrates the distribution of the different parts and the nature of the harmonies, it cannot, however, show the process of continual variation making that also went on in each part with the four players constantly exchanging their rhythms, interlocking their parts in lively manner while at the same time ensuring maximum rhythmic density, that is, ensuring a constant flow of pulses (eighth notes).

It is easy to criticize the documentation that accompanies these recordings. We never learn the names of the performers nor the titles of the pieces, nor in one case, even where the recordings were made, but we have to be grateful

nevertheless, for they are, I believe, the only existing recordings of Nama flute ensembles. As early as the 1930s, Percival Kirby was lamenting the demise of the tradition, and in the 1960s, Hugh Tracey (the South African collector and founder of the International Library of African Music), failed to locate any players of such flutes during his visit to the region. Cecilia Gildenhuis, reporting in 1981, as a resident of Windhoek, declared that "the majority of the people appear to have lost interest" in almost any form of traditional music ("The Musical Instruments of South West Africa, Namibia" in Paper Presented at the Second Symposium on Ethnomusicology, 1981, ILAM, Rhodes University Grahamstown, pp. 28-33). These recordings illustrate one point in time during what must have been a period of rapid change in Nama tradition. Laura Boulton's piece of "rescue ethnomusicology" was a timely venture resulting in some uniquely interesting material, and happily now available for listening and study at the Archives of Traditional Music.

Peter R. Cooke held the Laura Boulton Senior Research Fellowship during the spring of 1991.