NEWLY DIGITIZED 100-YEAR-OLD RECORDINGS BRING AFRICAN SONG AND DANCE TO LIFE

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For over a century, songs from eastern Kenya have been silently stored at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm. The songs are recorded on phonograph cylinders—but who has access to a phonograph today? Luckily, the National Library of Sweden recently digitized the phonograph reels and made them available as open data on their website.
So what do the recordings sound like? Raspy, crackling voices emerging from the past... Listeners can sense the atmosphere through background noises – someone laughing, singing birds, a bleating goat...?

The material consist of dance and work songs from kambaland in eastern Kenya, as well as recordings from the Tharaka, one of the Meru-speaking peoples on Mount Kenya’s eastern slopes. In addition to the songs there are also stories ("The girl and the youth in the pond"), and revival songs translated into kamba, such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," with a European melody. When listening to one recording after the other of kamba songs and a missionary song suddenly appears, the revival tones feel strangely alien.
FIELD WORK 1911-12

Over the span of two years (1911-12) Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom conducted extensive field work in Kambaland, eastern Kenya. Included in his comprehensive work with recording language, history and customs, documenting farming practices and social life, etc., was also that he used a phonograph to record songs and stories. This was long before, Bronislaw Malinowski, generally referred to as the father of modern social anthropology, invented long-term field work as an anthropological research method. The method was a result of Malinowski being left on the Trobriand Islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea when World War I broke out.

At that time, Gerhard Lindblom was already back in Sweden and in the process of finalizing the monograph *The Akamba in British East Africa* (1916), which would earn him international praise—and which is still the basis for all subsequent cultural research on Kamba. In his book, Lindblom wrote that it was impossible to get women to sing into the phonograph “even though I asked those who I had been in daily contact with for months and whose confidence I enjoyed” (Lindblom 1920: 417). The men, however, were enthusiastic, which is why we only hear male singers in the recordings. (Although this file makes you wonder: ZS_R89-0003-036.mp3).

WHAT ARE THEY SINGING ABOUT?

The songs start high and without discernible words (E-e-e-e-e. A-a-a-a-a), as a kind of calling. The singing that follows is then often quite close to the spoken language, at least on the recorded songs that have been digitized. Many of the recordings have a song leader leading and a group of singers responding. Often a loud, discordant note can be heard. It sounds almost like a child crying or a dog whimpering, which contrasts with the rest of the singers’ more monotonous and chanting performance: clapping, feet stomping a beat.

Lindblom writes that it was difficult to note the exact wording because the singers had difficulty quoting the lyrics without performing them (Lindblom 1920: 417). The act of writing in his notebook at times scared the participants. "The informants,” he wrote, were "troubled by the writing, or at least distracted, so that they lost concentration. I usually therefore took the precaution of placing some protective object between me and the person, so that he could not see what my hands were doing” (Lindblom 1922: 19). The songs were often improvised by the song leader and when "a song became worn out, he [the lead singer] had to come up with a new song, and a basic rule seems to be that it was not customary to sing a song longer than a month or so” ( Lindblom 1934: 40). The dances were ongoing most of the time, especially under moonlight.
Most of the recorded songs are dance songs. Lindblom has transcribed and translated them. They may have sounded like this:

*Listen, ee, friends!*
*Young men, catch the breasts!*
*From the breasts come disasters.*

*Kaluki, a young kamba girl photographed by Lindblom in 1911. 0087a. (PD)*
Wa Mulatya, I heard, I don’t sing,  
and I have drunk the rivers, I will finish.  
I have drunk on Kilimandjaro. I am singing here with fear.  
Wa Mwatha isn’t here. You have seen the breasts, let me show you  
another thing, may I turn over the dance.  

...  

Some explanations: The young men and women stand in two rows facing each other. The song leader calls on them to move towards each other. Each boy puts his right cheek to the right cheek of the girl opposite him and they move to the rhythm of the song, and the girls’ breasts touch the boys’ chests. The part stating ”from the breasts come disasters” refers to jealousy causing fights on the dancefloor. We also learn that the dance leader has traveled widely (I have drunk many rivers of water, also on Mount Kilimanjaro). The song leader experiences fear, for he does not see his beloved, Wa Mwatha, among the girls. Then he re-directs the dance so that the boys’ row moves away from the girls’. Soon they will dance towards the girls again, but let’s leave that song (Lindblom 1934: 52-54) to also listen to a piece from a working song.  

In this song, there’s a woman lying on her knees grinding flour. She remembers the family she left when she married.  

Muesja, do I not call you, I poor person!  
I have not our family and I have not my mother.  
and I have no relations to call.  
The death, I do not give him food or water.  
he has refused me my father  

...  

Explanations: The singer turns to Muesja, one of the women at the flour-grinding place, to explain how abandoned she feels without her family, her mother, her relatives. Death has taken her father, so she will not share any of the grinded flour with death (Lindblom 1934: 50-51).
Often, dances were held at night but sometimes also during the day – like here after a circumcision ceremony. The dancers are adorned with ostrich feathers and Conus shells. Photo: Gerhard Lindblom 1920. 0115.0065 (PD)

A lullaby, a mother sings to her child:

Mother, mother of the child, stop crying, poverty!
You have come, you have surpassed my crying.
And even if it is the rain which rains,
I put away the tree, I shall call my mother.
And even if it is the Masai,
who carries spear and shield, I put away the tree.
I shall call you, I shall lull you to sleep on my arm, mother.
I shall not hear the goats who are bleating.

Explanations: A mother often called her child "mother". (It is still the same today.) Do not cry like the poor. I am happy that you have come, but you cry more than I did as a child. Even when the rains come, I take no digging stick (‘tree’) and go to the field. Nor if the Masai (enemies) come. I will still rock you to sleep, even if the goats bleat (Lindblom 1934: 51-52).
Lindblom’s collection of objects is missing something. Museum objects emphasize that which is stable and still. But that’s not life. Life is drama, joy, action. The dynamics of the life of the Kambas does not fit into a museum storage. But in the songs, we can receive contact with this missing puzzle piece. We hear the girl friends who seek out the bride on the morning of her wedding day. They sing about how they are going to miss her at the dance. And this is how it was in the Kamba society in the beginning of the last century: married women did not go to youth dances while the men continued to do so even after they had married. We hear a young man singing about a women who shuns him even though he fights to win her love, just like warriors do when dividing cattle after a raid. And we hear the old women singing about the ancestors who must give rain (i.e. food), so that the men again will get power to have intercourse with their wives.
Young men dressed up for the dance. They wear metal spirals and Conus shells. Photo: Gerhard Lindblom 1912. 0087.a.0094 (PD)

MACHAKOS—NOW AND THEN

The now digitized songs were recorded in Machakos; Lindblom also did recordings in Kitui and some other places, but most of the songs are from Machakos. This adds, I think, an extra dimension to the time travel. Machakos is just over 50 kilometers from Nairobi. In Lindblom’s time, this was quite far,
with the time-consuming carriages of the time. (Actually, this is still the case today, with endless traffic jams between Machakos and Nairobi.) But it is not traffic jams Machakos is known for, but rather the radical transformation the farmland has undergone. The soil in Machakos was impoverished and erosion damage significant, making yield low. However the proximity to an insatiable market for vegetables in Nairobi made it profitable to rehabilitate the land. Today the slopes are terraced and the economy is booming. The transformation was described in a classic book in development economics with a title that accurately captured the process: *More people, less erosion* (Tiffen, Mortimore, Gichuki, 1994). It was possible to terrace the degraded slopes because there were enough people to do the job, and the nearby market could accommodate all the tomatoes they could grow.

In the Lindblom kamba collection there are billhooks and digging sticks as well as cowbells and ladles that give us insight into the economy before the major changes occurred in the second half of the 20th century and into our time. But thanks to the now released recordings, we also know how it sounded while working in the fields. A work song can be this short: "Aaa, I dig with the digging stick, eee", sung over and over again with a powerful and energetic voice. When we hear the line, the digging sticks, dance rattles, drums and flutes in the collections come alive.

**THE LINDBLOM COLLECTIONS**

When Gerhard Lindblom returned from his first major field work in kambaland, eastern Kenya, (described in Ostberg, 2002) he brought objects, images and texts that were incorporated into the collections of the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. The volume and quality of the documentation has attracted generations of researchers; the objects and photographs have been exhibited many times. In addition to objects from the Kamba, there are also collections from the Kikuyu, Masai, Dorobo Chagga, Pare and some other groups. There is also a large collection of photographs. In 1984, the Museum of Ethnography, in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya, carried out a revisit study in the areas where Lindblom had been, in order to study how the material culture had changed. New collections were acquired by the two museums.

References:


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