

# NAMIBIAN TALES

KALAHARI ENCOUNTERS



# Beginnings...



The idea for *Namibian Tales* -- an acoustic quartet diving into the musical traditions of Namibia -- was first conceived in a living room in Amsterdam in 2014. The room belonged to percussionist and producer Sjahin During and had already witnessed the birth of some innovative musical ideas.

When we formed our group a year later, we were still finding our musical feet. We spent months exploring and creating together, searching for our own sounds. In the summer of 2016, we recorded our first album *Itaala*, which was awarded the "Best World Music album produced in the Netherlands".

From there we went on to play concerts around the world, from the Netherlands to Namibia, and to Jordan, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Morocco and China. From the very beginning, a major source of inspiration for our music came from the songs and sounds of the San people, which was one of the Namibian music traditions we had become fascinated with. From the start, we dreamed of someday working together with San performers, but little did we know it would happen so fast.

## FINDING THE SOURCE

We spent several weeks searching for information and for contacts who could tell us more about the music of San communities in Namibia. The Khoisan-speaking San people are often referred to as "Bushmen", living in communities as nomadic hunter-gatherers whose ancestors were the first inhabitants of southern Africa. Various studies have shown that their DNA is among the most ancient in the world, causing them to be named the "Children of the World".

Surprisingly enough, very little is generally known about their music. We were curious and wanted to find out more about their culture, their music, their philosophy, their way of life and their stories, their tales. What kind of music could we expect from one of the oldest cultures in the world? So, in November 2016, Sjahin and I made our first trip to Tsumkwe together with the Windhoek-based bassist Afron Nyambali. We drove 800 km into the desert, looking for musicians we might be able to work with. We had high hopes, but we were realistic too. We had no idea who we would meet, what music we would come across, or if we would meet

anybody interested at all. We had spent weeks of intense research before taking off, trying to find out where to go, locating known musicians, but no one could give us any specific tips. Minette Mans, a renowned Namibian musicologist, had done research several years ago but she had since lost touch with her contacts and assumed the elders she worked with had passed away. We hit a dead end.

In a leap of faith, we decided to just go visit a campsite close to Tsumkwe and explore the area from there. We wound up in a village called //Xao /oba and saw our wildest dreams come true. For the first time, we witnessed traditional San music being performed. There was so much life in this music: the sounds of the voices were completely unique, the dances were full of boundless energy, the whole experience was so intense, with the number of people and things going on.

We offered to play some of our own songs for them, and this is when the magic really happened. As we reached a passage inspired by the sounds of San music, it was as if they understood the language, and before we knew it, the whole village was singing and dancing along with us. We spent the entire afternoon jamming and hooking into each other's songs until the sun went down. The music spoke louder than any words we could have uttered, our smiles revealed just how much we were all performing from the same feeling.

We were often caught off guard by the San sense of rhythm and the cycles they clapped over the songs we had. So 'advanced' in a way, and yet so normal to them, we were astonished time and again by what was happening. Somehow, we always found a way to find each other in the music. We realized that San music is based on the highly advanced rhythmic patterns they clap and dance to, often in odd meters such as 5/8, 9/8, 13/8, 17/8.

NIAE KOMTSA







During our first day, we were particularly struck by the grandmothers in this community who seemed to be leading the performances. After an afternoon of listening and sharing music, jamming and laughing together, we asked if we could meet some of them the next day to find out more about their music. We spotted four women who seemed to be particularly close to each other and fulfilled a leading role for the rest of the people during the performances. These women were N!ae Komtsa, the unofficial leader of the pack, //Ao !Ui, and two sisters Se//ae N!ani and //Ao N!ani. We sat together with them the following day, asking questions about the meaning of the songs while trying to understand the rhythms, melodies and how the different voices worked together. We learned that the songs are generally healing songs and songs that speak about animals, hunting, gathering and other day-to-day activities.

We soon realized that this was something utterly unique: what an amazing repertoire of complex rhythms and vocal polyphony! In the days that followed, we traveled to other villages in the area, but we found that the music these women from //Xao /oba knew, was so much more powerful and alive than anywhere else. After recording various songs, we asked whether we could work together with them in the future. They agreed, and we took these precious recordings along with us, back to Amsterdam.

#### OLD RECIPES, NEW FLAVORS

For six months, we delved into the songs: endlessly listening, trying to understand the rhythms, the melodies, studying them, feeling them, letting them sink in. For each one of us Amsterdamers this happened in a different way, from deciphering the rhythmic structures to grasping the flow of the melody. Though the recordings were right there with us, played on repeat over and over, we didn't always understand what was going on. After a while, the melodies started to lead a life of their own in my head. There was no getting round them anymore, they had settled in my ears and in my dreams.

The main challenge for me was to reach the point of being able to create freely from songs that were already there, with so much history already behind them. Experiencing this music was something so completely new to me. Living in this unknown musical world was both exciting and uncomfortable. I felt I wasn't able to grasp it, but after a while, like listening to a language you don't know, I started to pick up some words, and the words became sentences, and at a certain point I felt like I could somehow get what the conversations might be about. Musically. Yet the depth of significance within the songs remained largely unknown to us. It troubled me a bit when writing because I didn't want to take it too far away from the meaning or context the music had for this community.

It was a constant search for a way of writing that would resonate the feelings the music gave me when listening to it. Knowing that this would always be 'an interpretation of' San music, the most important thing was trying to 'let the music speak' and create from a place that felt genuine from within the personal experiences and connections

to their music. And from this space, I started translating the melodies to guitar lines and riffs, embedding their melodies into harmonies with bass lines, adding bridges, interludes, outro's, and, in some songs, adding new vocal melodies and lyrics as well.

This was the foundation on which Sjahin and I spent months of further composition. Sjahin found ways to decipher the rhythmic patterns and play them in new subdivisions, adding breaks, India-inspired tihai's and percussive solo's on top. Debby and I struggled while studying their melodies, timbre, and especially their sense of phrasing. Even now, the timing of some of the melodies still remains a mystical mystery to us. Once we became more familiar with the songs, we started adding vocal harmonies and choruses to these new pieces we were building from the gems the San grandmothers had passed on to us. With Bence's cello playing we were blessed with even more colors with which to paint new landscapes, allowing these old songs to travel beyond the desert into worlds more familiar to us. We got together, sometimes daily, for weeks on end trying out



//AO N!ANI



ideas, fine-tuning, searching for new musical spaces, all the time imagining Nlae, //Ao, Se//ae and Baqu were there with us. We now had echoes from all over the world resonating to songs from the Kalahari.

## ENCOUNTERS

The time came to return to //Xao /oba to present the women with the music we had come up with, an exciting and nerve-racking time. What if they didn't like it?!!! We drove back to the village where we had left our hearts. It was dark, and all we could see were tiny fires burning in front of the homes. As we walked toward one of the fires, children started singing some of our songs we sang together back in November. It was one of the most moving moments in our lives, as if we were being welcomed home. We could hardly believe it. People started to gather around the fire as we sang. "Hulle soek die vrou mense" someone shouted in Afrikaans, meaning: "They are looking for the women." Then a group of children started walking, and everyone followed. They led us to the women we came to see. All along we were singing together, and that's how we found

the ladies sitting round the fires at their huts with their families. It was such a humbling moment. We greeted each other and spent some time together around the fire. We couldn't wait to start rehearsing with Seg//ae N!ani Baqu Kha//an, //Ao N!ani and N!ae Komtsa the next day.

Setting up our sound system was a happening in itself. We brought along a generator to power the mixer and speakers, put a large carpet on the sand and built our stage for the coming days, next to the giant cactuses. The whole village stood by, witnessing the event. We knew we had to rehearse amplified and in the position we would be on stage, in order to be prepared for our performances together. Needless to say, we created quite a circus doing our first mic-checks and watching their faces the moment they heard their voices amplified and blaring throughout the village. We spent the first five days presenting the songs we had created, explaining the structures and trying out different ideas together. We were amazed at how quickly the grandmothers picked it all up. Our newest musical addition came in the form of



Afron Nyambali, the 'Namibian Massai'. Twice as tall as anyone else in the area, he was a sight to be seen.

San music is mainly based on (poly)rhythmic clapping patterns and polyphonic vocal melodies. All songs have dances that embody those rhythms. Once they understood how their songs were incorporated into this new bed of sounds rhythmically, our new San acquaintances joined in seamlessly. Only when we 'tampered' with the rhythm or the melody (by spacing the rhythm or melody differently) was there some confusion. We were already mentally prepared for having to toss out half our ideas, but our preparations had been unnecessary. Together, we made a smooth transition, given the fact that in San music there are no 'arrangements' in the form of interludes, harmony changes, and solo parts for individuals be it vocal or instrumental. All tribal songs and dances are meant for everybody to join in. 'Musicians', in that sense,

don't exist as everyone participates in the music and dance. The distinction between a lead singer and a responding chorus, a song format often found in Africa, is completely absent here. All singing is a collective effort.

It was exciting finding each other in these new pieces. Tree Shade was inspired by a song about finding shade under the Quiver tree (G!un); Namibia O is a fairly new song celebrating Namibia's independence (the creator(s) of the song unknown); San Dance is based on a song celebrating the gathering of the Mangetti fruit (#'osi); Elephant's Oracle is drawn from one of the elephant songs (!xo tsi); Osima is a song about visiting a dear friend, and comes from 'Ousie Ma', which literally means 'my woman'. Choco is a medley of ostrich song (Tsu'u) and a song which apparently in Afrikaans slang says 'Check hom cherry' about how the guys are checking out the girls!

Five days into the rehearsals, Afron went to pick up Debby and Bence at the airport in Windhoek. It was their first time in Namibia. Needless to say, it was quite a journey

SHISHANI



## SJAHIN DURING



for them to land in Namibia and drive off straight into the Kalahari. They arrived in the darkness of the desert night and woke up the next day to find our new rehearsal room was now situated in the middle of a sandy plane surrounded by huge cactuses. Meeting Seg//ae, Baqu, //Ao and N!ae was lots of fun, including the introduction of 'stroopwafels' (Dutch caramel cookies). This wasn't the only new thing for the San people. I'm pretty sure the area had never hosted a cello or a kora before either. Having all these musicians gathered in this space was already surrealistic. But hearing the music we had rehearsed in Amsterdam now woven together with the voices of the ladies who had captivated us for such a long time was even more so. Debby, Bence, Sjahin and I looked at each other in amazement. For all of us, it felt like it all made perfect sense now, everything had come together. During the days that followed, we experienced many beautiful moments during our tea breaks. This was when the ladies started joking, singing other songs, playing dance games with melons, the songs just kept on coming!

After a ten-day rehearsal period, the time had come to put our hard work to the test. We went to Tsumkwe, the main town in the area, and set up a stage next to the gas station. We gave our first concert together with the whole town standing around us. The energy was so high, so full of emotion. This concert made a true statement for this community in this city. Imagine seeing these women singing their traditional songs with 'a group from Europe' joining them! People loved it. If the whole village of //Xao /oba could have come, they would have. But we simply didn't have enough cars. We drove to Tsumkwe with about eight youngsters squeezed on the backseat on top of us. This was their moment too. Every single day we saw the same youngsters (aged three to fifteen) show up for rehearsal, as if they were part of the project themselves. During breaks, the kids jumped up to be able to sing through the mic's, playing the drums and dancing. In ten days, they didn't miss a single rehearsal. And in fact, they should have been going to school. Seeing their mothers and grandmothers singing, performing and going on tour was clearly inspiring to them.



We carried this excitement on to the next day, as we were now headed toward performing in Namibia's capital city.

### URBAN HOMAGE

We drove back to Windhoek as a true clan in three cars: the film crew, the Namibian Tales convoy, and, in the third car, the San ladies. They were driven by Gerri Gwi, an exceptionally kind gentleman who happened to be San preacher. I feel confident enough to say Windhoek couldn't have welcomed a more unusual group than ours. We reached the Warehouse Theatre and were received like celebrities. Our sound technician, Chris Weeda, had just arrived from Amsterdam and was waiting for us there. We knew we were in good hands. What followed was another round of hard work: getting all necessary equipment in order for the live recording, sound checking, the last push promoting the concerts, getting the hall ready and mentally preparing ourselves for what was to come. The next day, we would all be on stage. June 16th arrived and what happened still seems like a rush. Sharing that stage together felt like an accomplishment in itself. The

audience was anxious and excited at the same time, and so were we. The first notes of the concert played, the journey had started. As much as we knew we were recording live and wanted to give the best show ever, we tried tuning into that magical space where all this music had come together. Though we were far away from //Xao /oba, where all the kids would already have been dancing and singing along, we knew that what was taking place was meant especially for them. This was more than a concert. It felt like a ceremony. A ceremony to pay homage to a culture so oppressed throughout history, yet so full of beauty. This was a ritual to welcome the meeting of people, from all over the world, to celebrate a treasure of ancient songs. It was this atmosphere that enveloped the stage, and the crowd seemed to sense this as well. With every song, the energy built and swelled, as if we were working toward a state of trance together. And on the day of the second and last concert, that was exactly what happened. Nlae, one of the grandmothers who had captivated us from the very beginning with her powerful presence, went into trance. The other women



DEBBY KORFMACHER



gathered around her, chanting and clapping to bring her back to consciousness. At that moment, everyone in the crowd, including ourselves, was taken by surprise, emotions ran high. It was a mixed feeling, one of both humility and pride. We knew that what we had achieved together was something special, something larger than ourselves. Here we were, wishing the kids in //Xao /oba could have seen how their mothers and grandmothers shined on stage.

We are deeply grateful to N!ae Komtsa, Seg//ae N!ani, Baqu Kha//an and //Ao N!ani and their community for sharing these songs with us. Hopefully, what we recorded will inspire many others, especially the youngsters, to cherish this heritage as much as it has inspired us.

- Shishani

A homage to the San.  
The oldest inhabitants of southern Africa,  
nomads of the Kalahari.



AFRON NYAMBALI

