

ISLAND DWELLERS WHO TALK BY WHISTLING

In Gomera, Canary Islands, the People, With a Birdlike Vocabulary, Send Long-Distance Messages Over the Hills and Valleys

By PAUL FARR

W HILE ONCE IN THE MOUNTAINS of Gomera, one of the Canary Islands, before coming upon their great-out-thill, an elderly woman Spanish conversation was an odd place in which to find it. "One of the peculiarities of Gomera," we read, "is the language without words. . . . It is a kind of whistling."

A living whistled language on a nearby island? If there were men who talked like birds over there, we determined to find out about them. That we eventually did so was due chiefly to luck. Gomera whistling had gone on for more than a hundred years unrecorded by the Spaniards for "the yahoos" in the mountains for an official investigation. But a syllable of the language had never been recorded; we knew now that unless immediate steps are taken it is doomed to oblivion.

In a fifteenth-century chronicle occurs this explanation of its origin: "The language [of Gomera] was undoubtedly large and deep, and the country is inhabited by people who speak the strongest language of all the other mountains there and speak with their lips as if they were without tongues, and it is said that a great prince for no fault of theirs had them put into water and had their tongues cut out, and, according to their way of speaking, the world before it." Another translation of this passage is quoted by the Faculty Museum of Harvard University. We decided to investigate.

SOME days later, accompanied by a guide, we were riding single file along a dusty trail bordering the gorge of Valle Hermosa in Gomera.

"We can teach you the whistled language in six weeks," the guide proposed. "It's easy, see?" Opening their mouths they demonstrated but how to cut the tongue behind the teeth, place a bent finger in a particular position against it, and let the tongue come through. "Speak the word at the same time," they said. We could not even make a sound. "Now, put your finger in my mouth and feel how I do it," said one, Federico. Then he let me a hand that revealed the valley in the opposite hills, reaching back and forth and up to the stark, barren peaks lost to heavy clouds.

Considering that human lungs created it, the noise was impressive; unfortunately we could not listen to the conversation without carrying great as that noise, but as another man's great was whistled. We were in a valley where human voices were the dominant factor, but the whistled language which forms the magnificent music has been known for centuries and has been known for centuries. One of the authors spent a fortnight on a rock near the shore. Though the rock was too small to be really able to whistle to him, "How are they living?" and to understand the answer, "Plan, all my own."

Every one of these Gomeras had used his tongue, so did all the whistlers we eventually encountered, including one woman. She used neither the nor fingers, but her tongue and her teeth. With her tongue drawn back and outstretched, as in a broad grin, she whistled "Papa" so clearly that we could hear her the "y's."

Impressed with our curiosity as our subject, the officials of Gomera suspected magnificence in arranging a visit. "In the region of the Arch," reads the report, "having made of the republic, the island, and the municipality. . . . There occurred in the territory of San Antonio an official proof of the whistled language of the Gomeras." Whistled by delegates of the government, inspectors and others, the proceedings were taken down in writing, day by day, on the left side of the mountain, before



A Gomera Whistler.

probably and without reflection. Photographs were taken of the whistler, four in number, and of the principal witnesses, as well as of the locality, a rugged gorge.

With a rocky mountain back to back with, and facing across the valley, two whistlers took a station together, and at least 500 meters away from them on the opposite bank two others. From the head of the valley came the whistling of wind, which occasionally occurred in a man. Visual exchanges other than whistling would have been impossible.

"Put up two more, Antonio," ordered Antonio Navarro, at our request. Antonio began moving, but he picked up only one. This was the only mistake made during the test.

"Take off your hat," the first came off.

"Hold out your right hand," and "Show your left hand" were necessary orders.

"What day of the week is it?" and "What month?" were answered properly.

Asked to give his name, José Benavente, replying Antonio, replied, "I am called José." To everybody's surprise, when the question came, "Who is with you?" instead of giving the names of witnesses, he whistled back, "Los señores del camino" (the men working on the road, some of whom were at that instant hastening the death of this remarkable tongue). He continued could have been their subject, for, as one observed just then, "What the whistling signifies which will whistle the words of all Gomera towns, whistling will be killed. . . . From that day down will be staged a full

war dead between whistling and the other town, and the former will be crushed to earth beneath the weight of rocks."

As we had been assured that these simple folk could "whistle" in a whole newspaper, we had one with us, but our whistlers could not transmit the word "newspaper." There is no such word in whistled vocabulary, possibly because no newspaper is printed in Gomera. Our command, "Please read something from the newspaper," was disregarded with a few phrases, "Tell them to give you a piece of paper and read it."

We asked whistling clerics and asked our boys what was being said. "Give me some of the whistlers you get it," was the answer. Thus ended the first official whistling test recorded in the archives of Gomera. A Gomera whistler, Guadalupe, indicated a lot of his own, but it was insufficient, and it was impossible to learn anything about it in Gomera. From our last, together with much other evidence, we may draw the conclusion:

There is nothing mysterious about the language, neither the origin nor the present state, and the fact that it is now known as little about it is due largely to the hardships involved in studying it. Probably it would be as more difficult to learn in whistled than to learn to speak any other spoken tongue possessing sufficient tone shading, as, for example, the language of China. Even to understand such whistled vocal sounds are distinguishable, though some are obscure. (Guadalupe, of course, are essential in differentiating words of identical sound, as "calle" and "calle," which would be totally different ones in a spoken word.)

Everybody knows that every little can be taught by whistling; to make one's self understood in Gomera depends upon generations of skill and aptitude. Short words, for example, must be learned by practicing as with speech. "Pá-fan," they whistle instead of "fan."

These legends attached to the origin of the language are charming, but there are more precise explanations than angelic tongues. Owing to the stark photograph of a volcanic island surrounded by impossible gorges, the whistled language has no ready means of communication. (Remember that whistling would carry further than the simplest word, a whistle only grew from necessity into a sort of shorthand. By the time the Quetzalcoatl arrived in the early fifteenth century the language was as highly developed as Spanish. This method of communication the Spaniards found practical enough to adopt.

During the succeeding centuries of Spanish conquest the whistled language died out completely, whistlers replacing it first for speaking and for whistling. As a matter of fact, except for whistling there is little communication between Gomera towns. This is no stranger than the silence of the island, the sound of which some persons accuse them to have been. Gomera whistlers do not talk much when in the society of their womenfolk, who, because they have no need, rarely learn to whistle.

The most full and conventional when, although against the odds, they transmit elementary thoughts to neighbors often more than a kilometer away. The whistlers of today were taught by their fathers, and they by theirs, and the present language is the accumulated effort of centuries of generations.

The effort is about to be nullified and the days of investigation are numbered. When the road now under construction permits rapid communication between the hillside of the hills and the adjacent city, the whistled language will be no more.



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ISLAND DWELLERS WHO TALK BY WHISTLING

In Gomera, Canary Islands, the People, With a Birdlike Vocabulary,
Send Long-Distance Messages Over the Hills and Valleys

By GERT VERT

SANTA CRUZ DE TENERIFE.

WE had been living six weeks in Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, before coming upon their greatest thrill. An eighty-volume Spanish encyclopedia was an odd place in which to find it. "One of the peculiarities of Gomera," we read, "is its language without words. . . . a kind of whistling."

A living whistled language on a near-by island! If there were men who talked like birds over there, we determined to meet some of them. That we eventually did so was due chiefly to luck. Gomera whistling had gone on too many hundreds of years unremarked by the Spaniards for "los yanquis" to win cooperation for an official investigation. Not a syllable of the language had ever been recorded; we know now that unless immediate steps are taken it is doomed to oblivion.

In a fifteenth-century chronicle occurs this explanation of its origin: "The barrancos [of Gomera] are marvelously large and deep, and the country is inhabited by people who speak the strangest language of all the other countries there and speak with their lips as if they were without tongues, and it is said there that a great prince for no fault of

"We can teach you the whistle language in six lessons," the guides proposed. "It's easy, see?" Opening their mouths they demonstrated just how to curl the tongue behind the teeth, place a bent finger in a particular position against it, and let the breath come through. "Speak the word at the same time," they said. We could not even make a sound. "Here, put your finger in my mouth and feel how I do it," said one, Federico. Then he let out a blast that traversed the valley to the opposite hills, ricocheting back and forth and up to the black forests until lost in fleecy clouds.

Considering that human lungs created it, the noise was impressive; unfortunately one could not testify to the conversational carrying power on that occasion, but at another time proof was obtained.

We were in a noisy motor launch passing the foam-lashed palisades which form the magnificent shore line between Hermigua and San Sebastian. One of the sailors spied a fisherman on a rock near the shore. Though the racket was constant he was easily able to whistle to him, "How are they biting?" and to understand the answer. "Fine, all big ones."

Every one of these Gomerans had used his tongue, as did all the whistlers we eventually encountered, including one woman who



A Gomeran Whistler.

pendently and without collusion. Photographs were taken of the whistlers, four in number, and of the principal witnesses, as well as of the locality, a rugged gorge.

With a rocky sounding board behind them, and looking across the ravine, two shepherds took a station together, and at least 500 meters away from them on the opposite bank two others. From the head of the valley came the sighing of wind, which occasionally increased to a roar. Vocal exchanges other than whistling would have been impossible.

rectly obeyed.

"What day of the week is it?" and "What month?" were answered properly.

Asked to give his name, José Hernández, replacing Avelino, replied, "I am called José." To everybody's surprise, when the question came, "Who is with you?" instead of giving the names of witnesses, he whistled back, "Los peones del camino" (the men working on the road), scores of whom were at that instant hastening the death of this remarkable tongue. No comment could have been more sardonic, for, as one observer put it, "When the highway arrives which will encircle the waists of all Gomera towns, whistling will be killed. * * * From that day there will be staged a furi-



THE WHISTLERS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

Antonio Navarro Negrín, 20 years old, Chipude shepherd.

Jose Hernández Cubas, 21 years old, Roadworker.

Antonio Herrera y Herrera, 18 years old, Roadworker.

Avelino Negrín Torres, 28 years old, Chipude shepherd.

A goatherd who did some jumping: Juan Suarez, Roadworker.

WITNESSES PRESENT:

Don Carmelo Luis Ros Alferez, Secretary of the Cabildo
Insular of Gomera
(Signed) C. Luis Ros

Sra. Doña Alejandrina Novaro Mora de Ros (his wife)
(Signed) Alejandrina Novaro Mora de Ros

Olga Ros Novaro (their daughter)

Don Sebastián Ascanio Garcia, Lawyer
(Signed) S. Ascanio Garcia

Don Fernando Rojas Delgado, Photographer

Avelardo Hernández Montesino, Chauffeur
(Signed) Abelardo Hernandez

Mr. & Mrs. Very
(Signed) Gest Very



¿ QUIERE USTED DARME UNA BOTELLA DE VINO ?

At an informal test on another occasion,
Victor Plasencia whistles "Will you give
me a bottle of wine"



TOMASELA Y GRACIAS
(Drink this and thanks. (for whistling) : : : : :)



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WHISTLERS