**Diana Powell-Cotton (1908-1986) & Tony (Antoinette) Powell-Cotton (1915-1997)**

**Place: Quex House, Birchington, Kent**

**Event: *Two intrepid women from Quex House, Kent travelled to the interior of Africa in the 1930s where they recorded the domestic lives of those they met and lived with. Arguably the first British women documentary filmmakers.***

On a rainy day in February 1936 Diana Powell-Cotton was 28 years old and her sister Tony only 20 when they left their home [Quex House](https://www.historichouses.org/houses/house-listing/quex-house.html), Birchington to embark upon a trip to the interior of Africa. They had prepared by learning to drive and to speak Portuguese. On arrival in Angola, West Africa they would be picking up their two and a half ton truck Jemima, onto which would be loaded their significant and heavy filming equipment.

Diana with her fine art degree, would utilise this skill in writing detailed field notes. Tony had beenvolunteering at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and both developed an interest in anthropology from an early age, with a further growing interest in ethnography. Their role as women filmmakers was not that extraordinary but as documentary filmmakers it was. Women have been at the centre of the film industry since its inception (more women worked in film during its first two decades than at any time since) but early pioneer women filmmakers have largely been written out of history with their contributions undervalued and early women filmmakers misrepresented by a ‘scarcity myth’[[1]](#endnote-1). From the early days of film, women had been turning the camera onto issues and subjects relevant to them. They have a different gaze. When it came to the documentary work of the Powell-Cotton sisters, they had not only to contend with filming in hot and inhospitable locations but there was work to be done in setting up camp, fires to prepare, pots to wash. They were involved in every aspect of daily life of location filming. The reality of what it takes physically, the hard work as well as logistics, is all the more important when considering these women were filming in the isolated rural interior of Africa in the 1930s. Setting their work as filmmakers in historical context, what makes their story fascinating is that both in terms of film production, documentary and anthropology they were trailblazers.

They lived amongst and made friends with a number of African women such as Shanika, a pot maker who was also a medicine woman. The Sisters spend time with her on a number of occasions and interview her alone and with her ex-husband, who Diana describes as ‘a sly looking brute”[[2]](#endnote-2). Diana writes how there are many people coming to the car to see them off but she is ‘Sad to see the last of Shanika, with her wrinkled bronze face, quick to anger but always laughing. Slower than anyone I’ve ever met and more vague but full of helpful wisdom. She came profoundly flapping in her newly acquired old canvas shoes.’[[3]](#endnote-3) No doubt, a gift from Diana.

The women covered about 2000 miles. They stopped sometimes briefly and sometimes for several nights visiting around 50 villages and towns. The weather ranged from dry and hot to torrential down pours and everything in between.

Article written by Jan Dunn

References

1. Hutchinson, Pamela (2019) Where To Begin With Early Women Filmmakers p. BFI [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Powell-Cotton, Diana Field Notes 23rd June 1936 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Powell-Cotton, Diana Field Notes 28th June 1936 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)