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DISCOVERY OF A TROUGH XYLOPHONE IN NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE

by

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The discovery of a trough xylophone near Lake Chilwa in Northern Mozambique might be of some interest to students of relations between Indonesian and African Music. As a "structuralist" in my approach to African Music, I do not think I can and will join the discussion "Indonesia and Africa". I would like if my short article could be taken as a traveller's account only and not as the expression of any attitude towards a particular theory.

It was by chance that we came to find *Mario Santu*, player of a trough xylophone on the 4th of October, 1962, some 2 kms. east of a small place called Chitambo on the road from Milango to Molumbo. We had been entering Northern Mozambique at the border post of Milange, coming from Blantyre. Originally my aim was to start research more north among the various Maku subtribes, but it happened that the man who kindly had given us a lift in his car only went as far as Chitambo, and it was apparent that there would be little chance for any other vehicle to pass the same day. Facing a free afternoon I asked the Portuguese shop-keeper in this village whether the natives around would play some "batuques".

The result of this quick inquiry seemed to be promising and we went on borrowed bicycles — accompanied by a crowd of schoolboys and other people — to the place where a xylophone player was said to live. Arriving at the house, I saw a large trough xylophone standing in the shade of the grass roof and the owner and player, a man of perhaps 35 years, saluted us.

Mario Santu spoke some Portuguese, but he did not know any English, although the place is near to the Nyasaland border. When I tried to ask him about his tribe, my question was obviously misunderstood, because he gave me two names first, which I could not remember from any tribal map of that area. They were: "Nyarini" and then "Dakwani". Feeling my dissatisfaction he suddenly exclaimed: "Cuabo, Cuabo, Quelimane." I have been unable to make certain whether he meant he was from Quelimane, which in fact I doubt, but I think it is rather definite that Mario is a Cuabo by tribe. Judging from the style of his music, I would find it very strange if he were a Nyanja, the tribe which according to maps settles in this area, and of which I had heard many musical examples.

Description of the Instrument.

The kind of xylophone played by Mario is called *Mambira*¹, according to his own indication and that of many other people at Chitambo. It had seventeen keys of a light coloured wood. The keys were placed over a trough-like resonator, which, however, was not one piece of wood, but consisted of five parts nailed together. The two front

¹ My journey to Northern Mozambique became possible through the aid of two research grants, one by the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, Johannesburg and one by the International Library of African Music in Roodepoort. I would like to express my thanks here to these institutions and my personal thanks particularly to Mr. Hugh Tracey and Mr. John Blacking.

² It is striking that this word resembles the name Mbira for the plucked idiophone. Besides his trough xylophone Mario possessed also a 6-prong Mbira, which he, however, called *Bangwa*. (The prongs were cut from *Chivala* wood, a kind of bamboo, and were attached to a plain board of a very light wood without any resonator.) The word *Bangwa* denotes a zither among the Tonga of Nyasaland. It is related to *Bango* and *Pango*, names for the broad zither of various tribes in Northern Mozambique and Tanganyika: Maku, Yao, Safwa etc. This is, of course, not the only example that relative names are used for xylophone and Mbira. The word *Timbila* for a xylophone of the Chopi seems to be related to Mbira as well: Ti-Mbila. The same root occurs in Northern Mozambique, where I found that the Makonde people are calling their 6-key log xylophones *Dimbila*. A similar case is the word *Malimba* resp. *Marimba* throughout Africa sometimes denoting a xylophone and sometimes the little plucked idiophone.

walls were twice as high as the two side walls. The two side walls had on the top-surface rubber strips attached to. The rubber had been cut from tyres of a car.

The keys were placed onto the soft rubber basis and fixed to the wood in a particular way, shown in Fig. 1 and 2. A hole was bored through the one end of each key, and a nail put through and driven into the wood of the resonator. Since the diameter of the small hole was a little wider than the diameter of the nail, each key was loose enough to let it sound well. The other end of the key was left free, but two nails were driven half way into the wood at both sides of it. The keys though not fixed at one end thus were perfectly prevented from moving.

SHAPE OF THE XYLOPHONE KEYS AND HOW THEY ARE FIXED TO THE TROUGH RESONATOR:

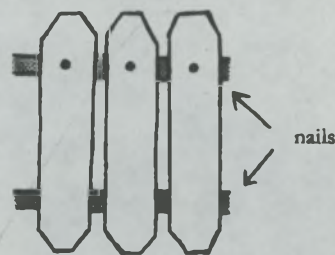


Fig. 1

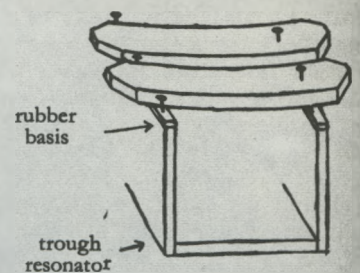


Fig. 2

The Tuning.

During a visit to London in April, 1963, The Rev. Dr. A. M. Jones was so kind as to measure the recorded scale of the trough xylophone for me with a Strobococon. This is the result of his measurement (keys from the top to the bottom):

Key No.		Key No.	
1	932 ^a	9	212
2	415	10	189
3	347	11	174.5
4	322	12	151
5	293.5	13	132
6	270	14	122
7	244	15	107
8	227.5	16	99
		17	79.5

Rev. Dr. Jones remarks: "Pitch-pipe sounded after last note is A/440 v.s.p. plus 74 cents. Figures below are corrected (I have subtracted 74 cents from each)."

^a Here the Strobococon obviously has registered the first harmonic. The basic note as I hear it from the tape is one octave lower: 466 v.p.s.



A Note on the Music⁴ and the Way of Performance.

The *Mambira* was played by two musicians; Mario Santu and a young man whom he had called and who seemed to be his pupil. Both musicians were sitting at one side of the xylophone, at the side with the smaller keys at right. Each musician played with two sticks, holding one in each hand. The ends of the sticks were covered with rubber balls. The xylophone keys always were struck in the centre.

The music performed and probably composed by Mario Santu had a flowing and swaying character. As a whole it did not remind at all of the xylophone playing of the major tribes of Northern Mocambique, which we should record later in a number of places; the Makua and Makonde people for instance. It resembled rather xylophone playing in the area of Quelimane and Nova Mambone. Its character was largely determined by a strong harmonic parallelism, mainly in thirds and octaves. I tried to follow the movements of Mario's hands and saw him beating the following keys frequently together: No. 4 plus 6, No. 5 and 7, and No. 6 plus 8.

In all compositions the instrumental part consisted of a short repetitive pattern. Both players used to play the same pattern in parallel octaves. But I often observed that Mario Santu, who had much greater skill in playing performed a variant of the theme in a quicker sequence of notes. To this instrumental part the musicians were singing a short phrase, which was melodically always an extract or variant of the instrumental

⁴ Copies of all the recordings can be found at the International Library of African Music, Roodepoort, and at the University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Anthropology.

theme. The voice part either was in unison with the top or "peak" notes of the instrumental part, or slightly heterophonic. In all recordings it was sung either by Mario alone or by both musicians in parallel thirds, thus completely duplicating the instrumental part. When Mario sang alone, he used to sing the upper third of his instrumental basis in a variant. There was no real text to the vocal part, the short pattern was no more than a short sentence or often only a sequence of syllables repeated over and over.

One of the items was exceptional. It was a sort of small theatre sketch. The musicians started the play with an instrumental introduction, which soon turned out to be the "leitmotiv" of the play. The different episodes of the play were always followed by it. This instrumental interlude was constructed in the same way as the other compositions described above. The play was mainly a monologue of Mario Santu, however in the traditional African Call and Response form. Every paragraph of his "story" was responded by the second musician with an affirmative "Eeee".⁸

Mario Santu's sketch reminded me much of the sketches of Stephen Gumbo of Southern Rhodesia, which Hugh Tracey recorded at Fort Victoria in 1958. (See AMA TR-80.)

⁸ This practice is widespread in East African Story telling. In stories of the *Ashirima*, which we recorded near Nova Freixo in Northern Mozambique, the sentences of the story-teller were constantly responded by a small boy with the syllables: "gol . . . gol . . . gogotom" (Orig. Tape No. A 29)