
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

ISBN: 0-520-02729-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 74-76389

© T. O. Ranger 1975

DT
365-4
R36

Ranger, T.O.

Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970

The Beri Ngoma.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

Printed in Great Britain

Contents

PREFACE vii

MAPS xi, xii, xiii

INTRODUCTION I

1 The Origins of Beni 9

2 Beni and the Great War for Civilization, 1914-19 45

3 Beni in the Towns of Eastern Africa between the Wars 77

4 Beni in the Diaspora between the Wars 106

5 The End of Beni 141

CONCLUSION 164

APPENDIX: The Role of Women in Dance Associations in Eastern Africa 167

INDEX 171

506917-3
9.20.77/cwg

Recently, however, these studies have come under heavy criticism. In Bernard Magubane's attack on Central African sociology, for example, some sharp things are said about the relevance and validity of concentrating on a phenomenon like the *Kalela* dance at all. Magubane objects to the triviality of the topic; to the impressionistic way in which it is treated; then to what he regards as the condescending and unsympathetic way in which alleged African aspirations to European dress are made crucial to the analysis; and above all to the synchronic emphasis which in his view means that the young men dancing *Kalela* are seen as though self-created, the product of their own taste and choice, rather than as the end result of the long process of colonial violence, colonial compulsion, colonial emasculation. One should study the *real* experience of Africans in Zambia, urges Magubane, not ephemeral and insignificant products of it. This real experience is a matter of colonial invasion, of resistance, of accommodation, of protest and the repression of protest.¹

I am not here concerned with these criticisms of Mitchell. I am concerned to scrutinize my own enterprise to try to ensure that it does not become in effect trivial, worthlessly impressionistic, condescending, and obscuring of reality. Naturally it is not my aim to be all or any of these things. My own work in the past has stressed resistance, and compulsion, and protest and in this book I hope to illuminate them from some unexpected angles rather than to abandon them as topics altogether. As far as the question of triviality is concerned I am inclined to appeal back to the estimates already cited of the significance of recreational history in Europe. There is a distinction to be made between the ludic and the ludicrous, between the festive and the futile. Thus, I do not believe that an examination of eastern African popular culture will turn out to be trivial though it will certainly have to be impressionistic. Above all, my examination will be diachronic; the dance mode which is the object of my study will be seen over very nearly a hundred years in its relation to the great crises of eastern African history – in relation to colonial occupation and to the overwhelming display of European military power, in relation to the devastation of the First World War, to the Great Depression of the 1930s, to the development of strike action and protest politics. I believe that the dance mode acts throughout all this as an admittedly very impressionistic scale of balance of emulation and creativity, of accommodation and independence. Moreover, because the popular cultural

¹ Bernard Magubane, 'A critical look at Indices used in the study of social change in Colonial Africa,' *Current Anthropology*, vol. 12, nos. 4-5.

form I have chosen was so widely diffused the diachronic treatment has to be wedded to broad geographical sweep and this enables us to move across the unevenness of colonial society in the dimensions of both time and space.

The Beni mode as an object of study

The particular form of popular culture on which I have chosen to focus is the Beni *ngoma*. The *ngoma* takes its name from its essential musical feature – the attempt to reproduce the effect of a military brass-band, though the elaboration of this attempt might vary from the provision of a full bugle, pipe, and drum detachment to the beating of a single big drum in some rural variants of Beni. The dances done to this Beni music have also varied considerably but all have been based on the idea of military drill. Sometimes the dance took the form of a parade, a procession, a march past; sometimes it took the form of a dance in platoon form; sometimes it took the form of a circling drill step. Singing was always an important part of Beni performances. Almost universally the language of Beni songs was Swahili and they normally took the form of simple rhyming commentaries on current affairs. Invariably the music and the dance were merely one part of the activity of Beni members. The Beni *ngomas* had a hierarchy of male and female officers, with elaborate ranks, uniforms, and titles of honour. These dignitaries certainly did participate in and were honoured at the dance. But they also carried out administrative and welfare functions among the membership.

These features of Beni – the sound of a brass band, the military drill, the hierarchies of officers with European titles – made it instantly recognizable wherever it went. In addition, however, the Beni societies founded branches subordinate to them so that the diffusion of Beni was not merely a matter of similar styles or a coincidence of names. The mode was popular for a very long time and in very many places. Its popularity lasted at least sixty years, though during that time Beni changed in many ways. It was popular in ‘traditional’ Swahili towns, in the new ports and industrial cities, and in rural environments all over eastern Africa. Whatever may be concluded about its origins it ended up by being an integral part of African popular culture, and it gave rise to variant forms – *Mganda*, *Kalela*, *Malipenga*, and the rest – which extended both the chronological and geographical scope of the mode’s popularity.

INTRODUCTION

Eastern African Beni can be regarded as one of a series of brass-band responses by people in a transitional period from pre-industrial to industrial society. It can be compared with the brass-band competitions of the Lancashire industrial villages; with the band processions of the 'sets' in eighteenth-century Jamaica, or with the 'marching bands' of Brazil. At the same time, as we shall see, Beni was very much an eastern African phenomenon and drew upon traditions of dance competition which long antedated the specific musical and dance forms involved.

Beni offers many advantages to the researcher who wishes to use it as a 'trace element' in the cultural history of eastern Africa. It was easily and much remarked on by European observers and there are abundant administrative and missionary reports about the dance. There is also a lively oral tradition concerning Beni. I have collected this tradition myself in places as far apart as Lamu on the northern coast of Kenya and the lakeside villages of the Zambian shore of Lake Tanganyika. Students have collected it for me in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, Ufipa and Rungwe, Songea and Masasi. Other scholars have come across the oral tradition of Beni in Ukambani in Kenya, in the Mahenge district of Tanzania, and in the Zambian industrial town of Kabwe.

Moreover, although Beni songs and the oral memories that go with them illuminate otherwise 'inarticulate' responses, the Beni societies themselves originated in a highly literate coastal tradition. At many times and in many places they produced their own records – poems to celebrate the victory of one society over another, bulletins addressed to the Swahili press, membership lists, correspondence between the officers of one branch of a particular society and another. Much of this is lost but a good deal of it survives.

Beni, then, is very richly documented. On the other hand, by its very character it raises the questions posed by Magubane in an acute form. Beni was in fact the parent form to Mitchell's *Kalela*; like *Kalela* it involved 'imitation' of European dress and conduct. Much of the European evidence about Beni takes the form of mockery and at first sight an extended treatment of the Beni mode would indeed seem an exercise in insensitive triviality. To my mind, however, it is in the end an advantage that Beni forces these issues upon us. Whether one likes or dislikes the fact, the question of what Africans should wear *was* an issue of importance to both blacks and whites and the history of Beni throws a good deal of light on why this should be so. Above all, Beni, with its apparently overwhelmingly imitative character, turns out in

the end to be deeply rooted in pre-colonial dance and competitive modes. In this it serves to remind us that judgements of derivation or creativity need to be more subtle than a mere assumption that everything 'modern' comes from the whites.

In this context the question of the origin of Beni becomes particularly important and it is to this that I turn in the first chapter of this book.

The victors with grass tied around their loins and placed on their heads, walk behind their prisoners, and sing as they go along . . .

The Beni players go around to different villages to play. If a member of Beni dies the others go to play in his honour. The cloth in which the body is wrapped is paid for by the society . . . If a member marries, the players go and dance in his or her honour.

Clearly at this date, at least in Ufipa, rural Beni was recognizably the same as Beni in Iringa or even as Beni in Mombasa, even if there were no parades with floats and no riddling poetry. But it was likely to be difficult to maintain this degree of elaboration away from the urban network of communication and correspondence.

Beni as a commemoration of the defeat of the Germans

The Beni societies of Ufipa were regarded as 'Germanophil' by the British; they continued to use German titles, sang songs commemorating British defeats, and mocked prisoners taken in *Manova* with songs of derision about the 'Mitamba', which the anonymous African recorder interpreted as a reference to the swaggering British soldiers. But rural Beni in Tanganyika sometimes had quite different connotations. Sometimes the Beni mode was quite explicitly used to express joy at the downfall of the Germans.

The clearest example of this comes from the hinterland of Kilwa and Lindi, an area which still remembered with bitterness the German suppression of the Maji Maji rising. Some revenge for this was taken when African inhabitants of the area informed the British of German troop dispositions, thereby precipitating the battle of Mahiwa which more or less forced the German evacuation of southern Tanganyika. 'Mahiwa is a river in Lindi in whose valley the fiercest battles between the Germans and the British were fought in southern Tanganyika,' says *Mzee* Thabit bin Ismaili, himself a Matumbi from Kilwa district. According to *Mzee* Thabit and other informants, many members of *Arintoti* and *Marini* broke away from them to form a new and specifically southern society. This new society was strong in Kilwa, Lindi, and Mikindani districts, and was brought by migrants from there to Dar es Salaam. It was called *Ngondomaiba* which means, according to all informants, 'there is a battle, or war, at Mahiwa', and it was danced 'in commemoration' of the German defeat.¹

¹ Interview with *Mzee* Thabit Ismaili, September 1968.

The war and the diffusion of Beni into Central Africa

The same sort of processes which spread Beni to Nairobi and to the rural areas of Tanganyika spread it still further afield. It spread during the war itself. African *askaris* and porters serving with both the German and the British armies introduced Beni to the peoples of northern Mozambique. African prisoners of war carried Beni to Kismayu in British Somaliland. And then, with the great demobilization and with the return of the armies from German East Africa, Beni was carried into all the territories bordering Tanganyika by *askaris* and by demobilized soldiers and porters.

Everywhere it went Beni was associated with the war. As it spread into the northern province of Northern Rhodesia in early 1919 it was danced especially by those who had been away fighting in the war, men like Charles Sinyangwe of Chisanza village, Mbala, who had seen action at the battle of Karonga. Though still a young man, Sinyangwe was permanently marked by his military experience. Even today he wears a khaki bush hat, and carries a metal swagger-stick, and is teased by the younger men for 'marching' everywhere instead of walking. 'When we returned from the war we found Beni,' Sinyangwe says. 'In the war there was no Beni, there was only fighting.' But he soon became a 'Captain' in his village Beni team and sang the Swahili songs which had been picked up from Tanganyikan Beni with a soldierly gusto.¹

According to a report made to the government of Nyasaland in July 1921, Beni in the Congo was danced only by 'old soldiers and their children' as a mark of pride in their distinguishing experience.² In Nyasaland itself the Beni associations of the early 1920s continued to bear ample evidence of their origin in the experience of the war. Dancers 'wore appropriate badges of rank fashioned out of lead' in order to indicate whether they were major-generals, colonels, captains, non-commissioned officers, or privates. 'Those who had fictitious commissioned rank wore helmets and had whistles on lanyards, and some wore Sam Browne belts.'³

At the same time it is plain that Beni was not limited to ex-soldiers or ex-porters. Its uses and forms were too varied for that. Even at this early stage in its Central African history Beni was taking on many

¹ Interview with Charles Sinyangwe, 12-13 September 1972.

² Report by Captain Fairbairn, July 1921, S 2/11/21, N.A., Zomba.

³ Clyde Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance*, pp. 10-11.

or treasurer; and are frowned on by the African authorities. 'Old village heads complain that these dancers always ignore their authority. Actually, the young men carried things so far that the sultan prohibited the *benti-ngoma* in the Ruaha valley because of the increasing excesses and brawls.'¹ Clashes such as these were minor but still significant indications of the tensions which operated within the system of Indirect Rule.

Beni and rural needs: village rivalry

Competition *within* towns or settlements was the norm for coastal society. Competition *between* villages or clan settlements was the norm for many Tanganyikan rural societies. Beni easily adapted to this. Instead of competing associations with many branches, each village would have its own dance group, known simply as Beni, headed by especially vigorous young men, but to some extent representing the village community as a whole. These Beni groups would then dance against the groups of other villages. Such village rivalry to some extent mitigated the generational rivalry also expressed in Beni. Thus in southern Upogoro each 'valley community or larger village forms its own group', and the 'increasing excesses and brawls' were caused by inter-village competition rather than by scuffles between young men and old men.²

Among the Yao of the border area between Mozambique and Tanzania, where Beni had probably originally been associated with the spread of 'tribal' Islam, the dance 'was performed on a competitive basis. The competitions were run on a divisional basis - i.e. each division consisting of, say, three villages. And in fact these divisions represented clan differences. Any given division represented people from a single clan. The divisions did not represent wealth groups.'³ In this sort of competitive context Beni songs were 'self-praise songs which praised your own clan and denigrated another clan . . . patriotic songs, praising particular norms of the clan'.⁴ The competition was

¹ P. Kunibert Lussy, 'Some Aspects of Work and Recreation among the Wapogoro of Southern Tanganyika', *Anthropological Quarterly*, October 1953. I am indebted to Mr Lorne Larson of the University of Dar es Salaam for this reference. Mr Larson's forthcoming account of the modern history of Ulanga district will contain a full discussion of Beni development there.

² Lussy, 'Some Aspects'.

³ Interview with Hussein Abdalla, Litisha, Songea District, 23 September 1968.

⁴ Interview with Rajabu Athumani, Morogoro Leprosarium, Songea, 25 September 1968.

fierce. 'The competing groups used witchcraft to overcome the rival group in performance.'¹ And competition was seen as the very essence of the dance: 'competition tended to beautify the songs and thus raised the standard of performance because each competing group wanted to do better than the other'.²

There are many other examples of this sort of village or clan competition in the rural areas. But although competition 'tended to beautify', rural Beni was nothing like as elaborate as the *Marini-Arinoti* confrontations. An account of Beni dances in Upogoro shows how modified both costumes and instruments had become.

A powerful drum about two metres high, so that a special platform of table height has to be erected next to it for the players, is put up in the middle of a clean swept place beneath a nice shady tree or in a village. The drum is beaten with a drum-like stick like that used with a kettle-drum. The left hand of the player plays variations of the tone on the vibrating drumskin and plays a soft accompaniment. Next to the large drum there is another smaller one, and nowadays one also finds tin cans as further noise instruments. The dancers arrange themselves in a large single circle among the drums. They are decorated and have their hair dressed, wearing bright scarves around their heads . . . As they dance the shrill notes of a football whistle sometimes sounds, and now and then the roaring of antelope horns. When the crowd sings and the drums accompany softly, the single row of dancers moves shuffling along until the rhyme of the song is finished. Then the big drum sets in with all its might. The dancers turn towards it, swinging in their hands the tail of the gnu or coloured handkerchiefs, swaying and rocking their bodies to the rhythm of the music.³

The development of Beni in particular rural environments

It is easy enough to see that Beni met these general needs of providing a dance suitable for rural Islam, allowing for the expression of the aspirations of young men, and articulating village rivalry and interaction. The working out of Beni history in any one particular place is considerably more difficult. In the towns of the Kenya coast Beni was a continuous affair, even if there were times when it was more and other times when it was less prosperous. In the rural areas, though,

¹ Interview with Jawadu Salehe, Morogoro Leprosarium, 21 September 1968.

² Interview with Hashim Mohamed, Morogoro, 27 September 1968.

³ Lussy, 'Some Aspects', p. 123.

here. In Umwera Beni had become assimilated under the name of *Chikosa* and was still danced in the 1960s. In Masasi neither Beni nor any mutation of it was danced by that late date. Informants are unanimous that this had nothing to do with the missionary prohibition. 'When the missionaries banned the dance,' asserts a Moslem elder, 'it had already got roots. People continued to dance, particularly in the villages. The ban only became effective around the mission stations.'¹ Beni is remembered as having been especially popular in the Chiwata neighbourhood during the 1940s despite missionary opposition. But thereafter it declined and was replaced by other dances. Teachers and schoolboys followed the fashions of 'modern' dance and jazz music; villagers followed a series of dance fashions, some of which the missionaries opposed as they had opposed Beni. 'There was another ngoma, known as *Jole*, which began in the 1950s,' remembers a mission teacher, 'and this was even worse in so far as it was mostly danced by youngsters and the product was the destruction of the girls. I think the church was justified in banning the dance.'² It seems improbable, though, that the ban was any more effective in the case of *Jole* than it had been with Beni.

I have no information, unfortunately, upon the general history of dance in the Masasi district over the past ten years or so. I do not know whether it has paralleled the developments in Bukurebe and seen the end of the era of dance or whether there have merely been changes in dance fashion. But one additional element can be observed at work both in Masasi and in other rural areas. An attempt is being made by the Tanzanian Government to prevent the abandonment of 'traditional' dances; such dances are encouraged at secondary schools throughout southern Tanzania; striking regional dances of the Makonde and Yao are performed on state occasions. I would hazard the guess that the effect of this activity will be comparable to the missionary efforts to sponsor 'traditional' dance as a defence against Beni, and that it will have relatively little to do with the essential patterns of cultural change.

To the west of Masasi another situation exists. The district of Tunduru is occupied by the people of the great Yao Sultans, who moved into Tanzania after the First World War. The Yao of Tunduru have remained fiercely Moslem and impervious to mission influence. They have ignored allegations of backwardness, secure in their own sense of their past superiority. In this environment, Beni has taken on

¹ Interview with *Mwenye* Amwanyese Mzee, Nakole, 30 September 1968.

² Interview with Raymond Jumla, Mkomaindo, 28 September 1968.

some of the characteristics of a Yao 'national' dance. The dance is now called *Magova*. One of my informants, a young Makua from the Masasi area, said that the only place he had seen Beni danced 'was at Tanga when I was working in one of the sisal plantations. There it was conducted by migrant sisal workers who came from the Tunduru district.'¹ Just as Beni was kept alive in Dar by migrants from the southern hinterland, so in Tanga, the original Tanzanian home of the dance, the only men who performed it in the 1960s were migrants from remote Tunduru.

This connection between Beni and the Yao recurs in Songea district, further west again. In 1968 Mr Ndomba interviewed a number of Yao migrants from Malawi and Mozambique. These men, now in their forties, had come into Tanzania for medical treatment at Morogoro and Litisha leprosariums in the Songea district, and at the leprosariums they performed Beni. Beni still retained some of its old elaboration in these leprosarium performances; men were elected as 'kings'; flutes and drums were played; songs were in Swahili. The performers regretted the old days when Beni was danced on a competitive basis, pitting village cluster against village cluster and clan against clan. As migrants to Tanzania, they all felt a common identity so that they now danced Beni as an expression of Yao-ness, rather than as an expression of clan membership. Still, it was important for them to declare their oneness and Beni retained a vitality in the leper settlements that it had long ago lost in the villages of Songea district in general.² The Swahili songs performed at the dances no longer boasted of the virtues of one clan or mocked the deficiencies of another, but commented on topical events – 'independence, economic upheaval, the Arusha Declaration, etc., etc.'³

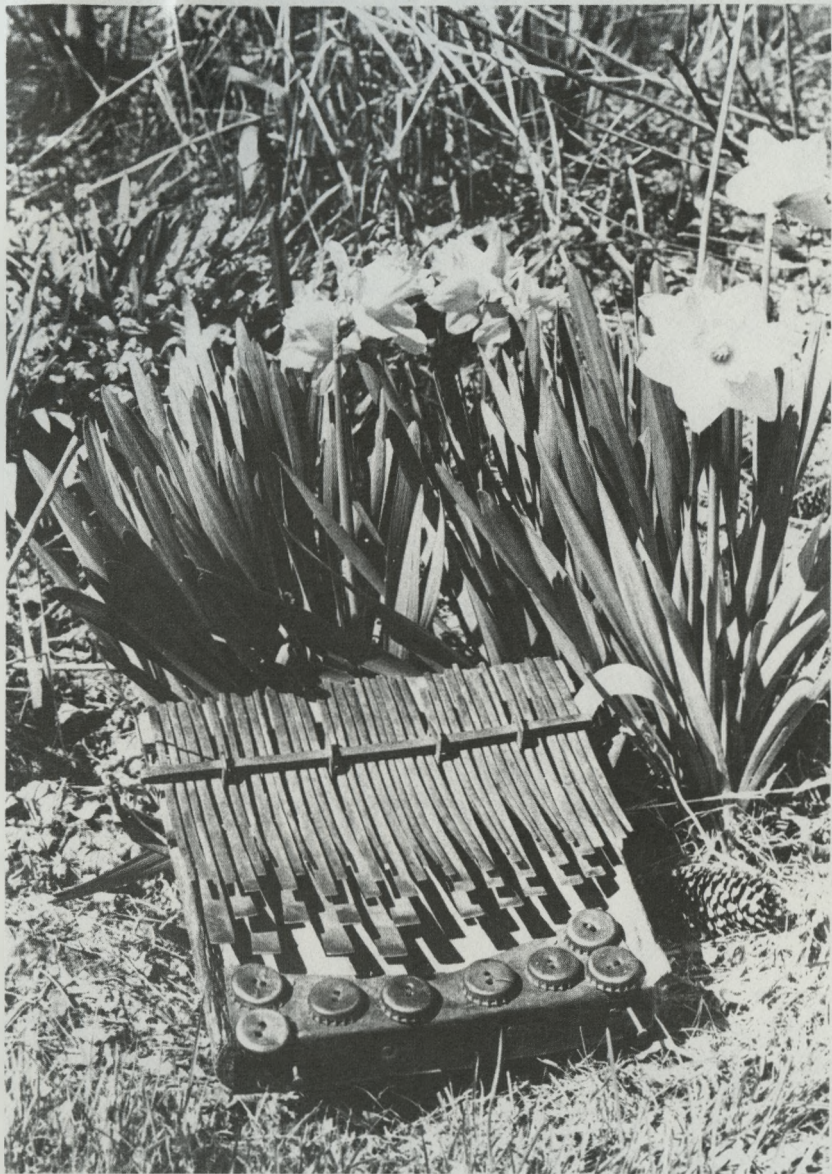
These Yao lepers were all Moslems. Their persistence with the Beni mode points up the continued commitment of the villages on the Tanzanian shore of Lake Malawi to 'the great Christian *Mganda*'. But further round the lake, in the country of the Nyakyusa, the situation was a more complex one. Mr Mwambene thus summarizes the results of the research he carried out in 1968:

It is said that what was called the 'Parade' by the Army in the first world war was copied afterwards by the villagers. The first

¹ Interview with Saifi Abdala, Mchawala, 18 September 1968.

² Interviews with Hashim Mohamed, Hussein Abdalla, Jawadu Salehe, Mwalimu Abdu, Sheik Hassan Ali, Mzee Osman Bakari, September 1968.

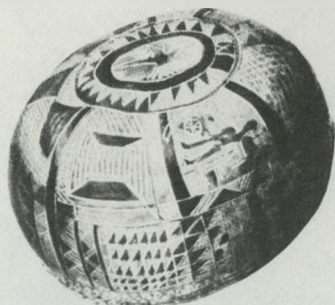
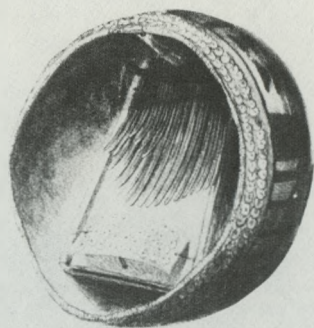
³ Interview with Rajub Athumani, Morogoro Leprosarium, 25 September 1968.



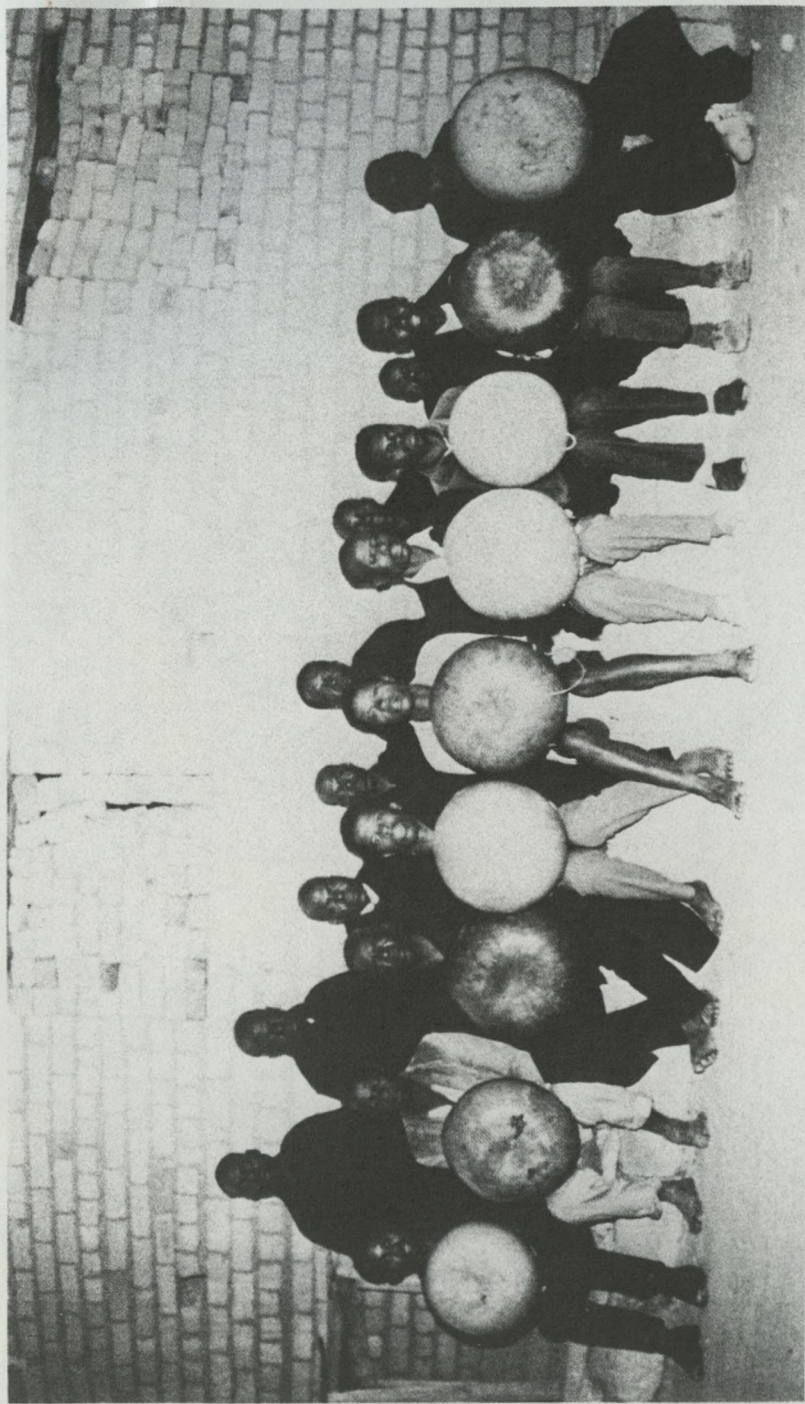
50-key Munyonga. (Soundboard: length 10"; width $9\frac{1}{4}$ "; thickness 2")



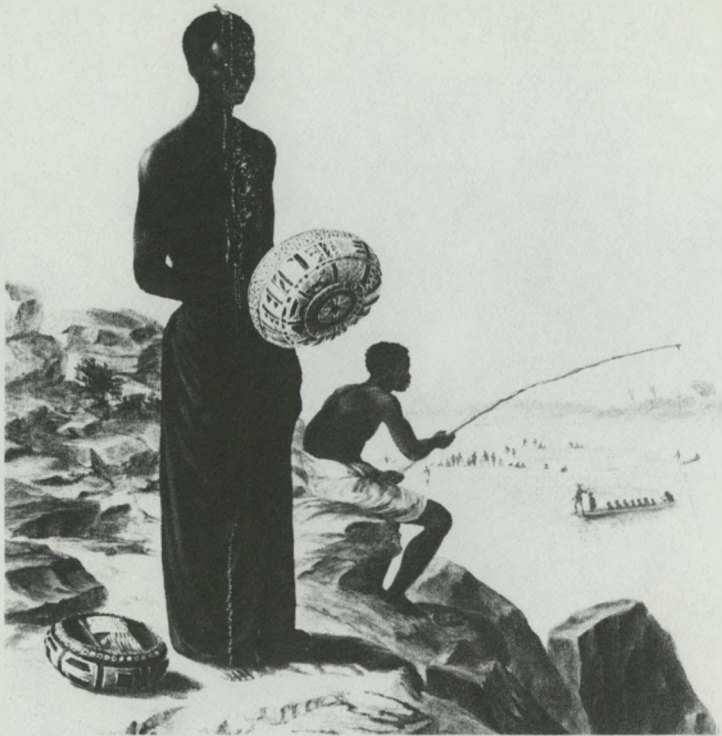
1. KANGE. *An mbira player seated in performance.*



2. TETE, MOZAMBIQUE. *Thomas Baines' nineteenth-century sketch of an mbira and an ornately decorated calabash resonator, (National Archives of Rhodesia, Salisbury)*



33. The mbira players of Muchatera Mujuru



34. A nineteenth-century painting of an mbira player by Thomas Baines; made in Mozambique where such traditional Shona mbira as the matepe are said to have originated (Royal Geographic Society, London)



35. Indirect teaching: Cosmas Magaya (left), John Kunaka, and Luken Pasipamire