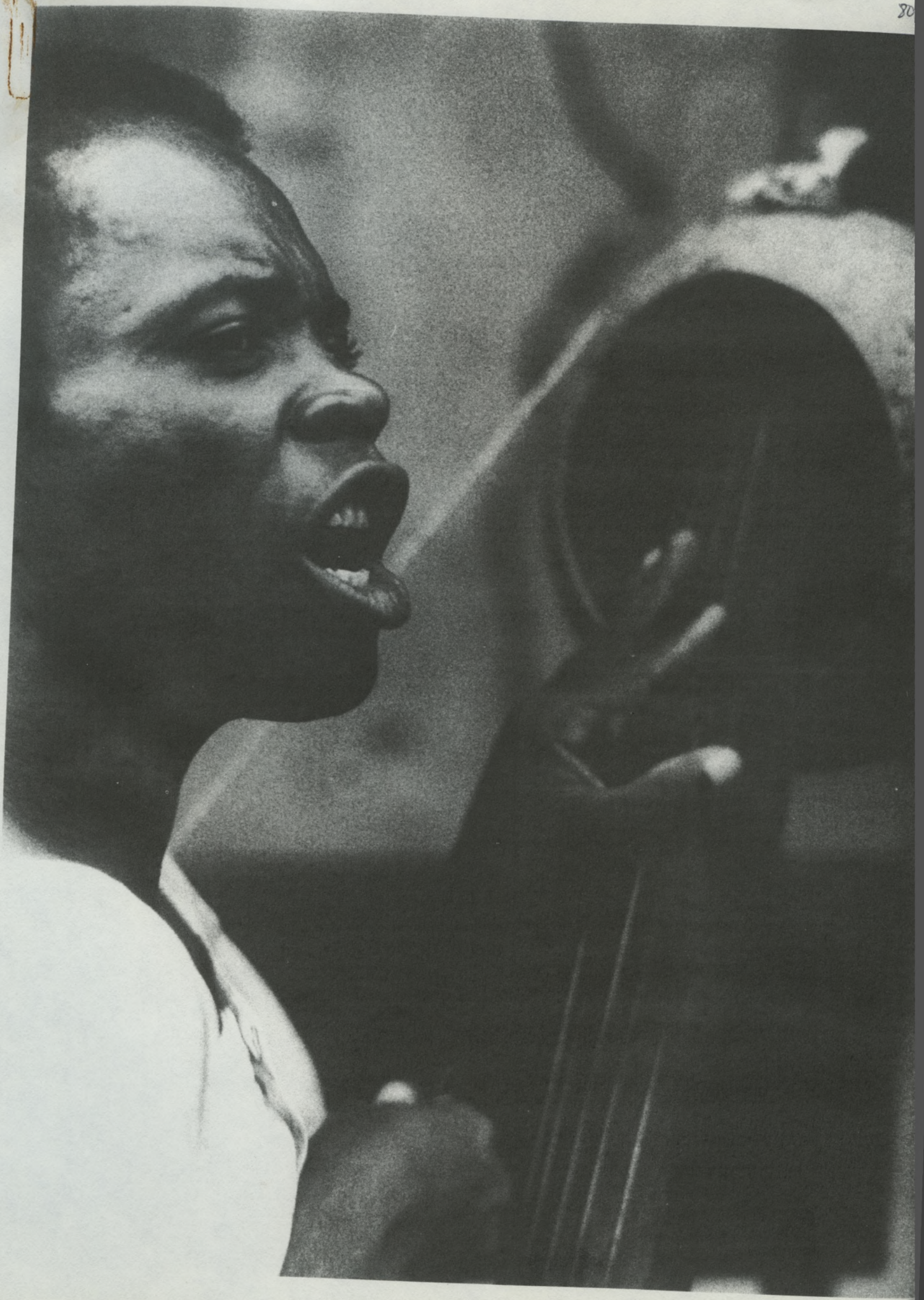


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Music, Song and Dance – a Part of Life

On and around the 25th of June, 1975, as Mozambique, after a ten-year struggle, celebrated her independence, the whole country rang with the peal of zithers and xylophones, triumphant horn blasts, the throbbing of drums and the jubilant voices of hundreds of thousands of people. Wherever Samora Machel, Mozambique's first President, appeared he was met with crowds of singing, dancing people.

When, in October, 1986, Mozambique was plunged into national mourning and Samora Machel was carried to his last resting place, great bodies of mourners assembled before the mausoleum where his coffin was laid to give voice in song and dance to feelings which no words could adequately express.

For Mozambicans – and many other African peoples – strong feelings, like sorrow and joy, find their natural expression in musical sound and movement. Music and dancing are not, as in Western cultures, isolated art forms. They are an integral feature of human life. People sing and dance when they gather to harvest and thresh the corn. Song, music and dance accompany the rituals that mark the most important changes in a person's life: when a child is born or given a name, on initiation into adult life, and at weddings and burials. Village quarrels or tensions can be resolved or dispelled through song. Moreover, song and mime are excellent traditional vehicles for political comment; powerful people can be censored or lampooned with deadly effect yet without risk of reprisal. When misfortune strikes, when the rains fail, the crops wither and the cattle die, the victims call on their ancestors' aid in song and dance.

Country children are from birth immersed in their community's musical tradition, absorbing the dance rhythms while still rocking on their mothers' backs or, at the age of six or seven, resting their hands on their father's as he plays the xylophone. There is little sense of the gulf that divides performers and audience in the West; stifflegged oldsters will suddenly get to their feet and join in; small boys and girls keep up as best they can, cheered on by the grown-ups when they do well. Even those who take no active

part are perfectly familiar with the music and dance movements and punctuate the proceedings with critical or complimentary remarks, as the case demands.

Music researcher Andrew Tracey writes in *Groves' Dictionary of Music* that Mozambique possesses one of the richest and most diversified musical cultures in the whole of Africa.

All Africans display extraordinary ingenuity in converting almost any common object into a musical instrument: tree trunks and sticks, boards and gourds, skin and horns and, in recent times, pieces of scrap metal and empty tin cans. Strung seed capsules worn around the ankles or tins filled with pebbles serve as rattles. Drums made of different materials and in a bewildering array of shapes and sizes are played with an enormous diversity of techniques. Widely renowned are the orchestras of the Sena and Maganja people with up to ten drums tuned in the pentatonic scale, which with an assortment of rattles accompany song and dance soloists.

Among the Cewa, Yao, Makonde and Makua people, the seven-stringed zither is popular, as is a long-necked single string fiddle with a calabash resonator. Blind, itinerant minstrels often accompany themselves on the fiddle during their long recitations of humorous and satirical poems.

The Makonde of Cabo Delgado Province where the war of independence began, are famous for their masked dancers and stilt-walkers. Women from Ilha de Moçambique, where Islam is the dominant religion, have borrowed their song styles, drums and dance steps from their Arabian sisters.

'Mbira' players are met with everywhere in the country. Shepherd boys wile away the lonely hours plucking out small melodies on five umbrella ribs laid across a piece of board. To others the mbira – made of over thirty metal tongues fastened on to a richly-decorated board, attached to a calabash resonator – is a sacred instrument. It is never used on secular occasions, but hour after hour in nocturnal seances the mbira players coax rich polyphonal tones from the metal tongues until their finger tips grow



sore and the dancers fall into a trance.

The 'nyau' dancers of the Cewa folk cover their bunched bodies with animal skins and leafy branches to create a great, mystical dancing beast which at funerals and other ceremonies honours, in a musical and choreographic dialogue with the women, the spirits of the tribal ancestors.

In the 'nyanga', the Nyungwe people's most important dance, pan pipe players move in a circle within an outer ring formed by a chorus of women. Each musician and singer contributes with one or two notes to a tightly constructed melodic pattern which alters in colour and texture as the flute players change their positions in relation to the members of the chorus. Each melodic fragment played on the pipes has been conferred on the village through the mediation of the ancestors and may not be altered. (New melodies may however be borrowed from other nyanga groups provided the village – and pre-

sumably the ancestral spirits as well – have no objections.)

Music leaders among the Chopi people, from Zavala in Inhambane Province, have quite the opposite attitude to their repertoire, continually striving to change their work and clearly unconcerned about letting the old pieces, which they once practised so assiduously, fall into disuse. Here music normally has the secular function traditionally associated with court music.

Every tribal chief in Zavala once had his own orchestra and dancers, who performed at official ceremonies. The chief Chopi instrument is the xylophone, called in their own language a 'timbila'. A full orchestra may include five types of timbila with partially overlapping tones, but together providing a range of four octaves. A single orchestra can have up to thirty timbila players and at least twice as many dancers.



Dancing the Tufo (left)

The timbila is the most important Chopi instrument

A common Chopi musical form is the 'mshao', an orchestral suite made up of several movements in which the instrumental part, a complex interweaving of melody and countermelody with improvised variations, alternates with song, dance and juggling feats. A suite is made up of between nine and eleven movements of varying lengths and lasts about 45 minutes.

The composition of a mshao can take months, especially as the musicians are in the meantime having to support themselves by working on the land, or elsewhere. The leader will begin by composing the words. He will then experiment until he has found the right melodies and harmonies to go with them. At this stage the dance leader comes into the picture and he, too, tries out new choreography and movements with his dancers. Individual performers may also want to have a say in the process before the work is finally ready for the public.

The Chopis' musical instruments, dance forms and song styles have remained unchanged since at least the 17th century when a Portuguese priest, P. André Fernandes, described them in a letter to a colleague. The timbila singers naturally sang the praise of their chiefs, but their duty also included conveying popular grievances to their masters – in sung form, of course – while the latter were expected to preserve appearances by pretending not to notice. For people without a written language the mshao did the duty of a local newspaper, providing a mixture of serious news and village gossip.

But both news and satire date quickly; orchestra leaders must be continually revising and updating their compositions. At the start of the 1950's Hugh Tracey made transcriptions of seven mshao suites. When he returned to Mozambique in 1961, the entire repertory he had transcribed had fallen out of use and been replaced by new works. When Mozambique became independent, the chiefs were deposed. But the orchestras remained. Today they cooperate with the local party cadres.

Portugal's withdrawal from Mozambique is so recent that middle-aged people can still remember the colonizers' suppression of traditional culture. Children in the mission schools were forbidden to take part in village ceremonies. To stop a festival, the priests were quite capable of resorting to blows or calling in the police, who would punish the dancers with whippings.

That so much of the musical tradition nevertheless survived is partly explained by the fact that the Portuguese never gained full control over the interior of the country until well into this century, and partly by the ironic circumstance that Portugal did not itself have the resources to build up an infra-structure and start large-scale industrialization in its own colony. Most of the children in the villages never went to

school. In not learning to read they at least never learned to despise their parents' 'sinful', 'barbaric' culture.

Moreover, the authorities' policy of labour conscription and their decrees on compulsory cultivation of export crops prompted the villagers to rise to the defense of their own traditions. For FRELIMO, Mozambique's liberation front, the struggle had always been about cultural as well as political and economic independence. In the liberated areas, meetings were accompanied by music and dance as a matter of course. A common interest grew up between guerrillas and villagers who had been banned from conducting their ceremonies.

A typical example of this common interest was the relationship between FRELIMO and the nyau dancers. To escape police persecution, the dancers formed secret societies practising by night, deep in the jungle. There they encountered FRELIMO forces which at the beginning of the 1970's had crossed the Zambezi river into Tete Province. Themselves proscribed, the dancers readily espoused FRELIMO's cause and joined the guerrillas. Their support is thought to have contributed significantly to FRELIMO's rapid advance through the province.

FRELIMO's party programme stresses the importance of furthering traditional culture. National literacy campaigns or child vaccination programmes use traditional songs with specially written words as educational material. When FESTAC, the great festival of African culture, took place in Lagos in 1977, Mozambique was already able to send a national dance troupe as well as a jazz band. Two large song and dance festivals have also been held in Maputo in 1978 and 1980, featuring participants from all over the country.

Despite official endorsement of native cultural traditions, however, relations between political leaders and local music groups are not without their complications. The nyau dance, for example, is often held up as a symbol of the people's heroic resistance to colonial repression. Yet it is not accepted on its own terms, but must be "freed from superstition" before it can take its place as a part of official national culture.

Two musical researchers, Martinho Luthero and Martins Pereira have also been influenced by the official view. They consider the time has come to break away from ancestral ban on new melodies and to allow more room for creative play. But can the nyanga survive the collision with modern musical forms at all if its ties with the ancestral spirits are severed?

Festivals are of course stimulating events for performers and audience alike. However, in a competi-

tive process where participants are progressively eliminated there is always the risk that the more spectacular groups will be chosen at the expense of other, perhaps more genuine but less pretentious groups, especially where the judges are teachers or party cadres who have absorbed western cultural values as the price of their education.

Performing under the glare of spotlights is something quite different from taking part in a communal celebration on a moonlit night in one's own village. A choreographer from Guinea-Conacry with experience of guest appearances in Europe was invited to the 1980 Festival to show the groups how to adapt their performances to the scenographic arrangements. One cannot help pondering on what effect that type of instruction has on dancers and musicians once they return home.

At the 1980 Festival the dances were shortened and changed in order to give as many groups as possible a chance to perform.

The timbila groups had not been allowed to bring their dancers, which meant performing a mutilated mshao suite. In a press debate after the Festival, Martinho Lutherero wondered whether anyone would dare treat a symphony orchestra with such disrespect. The debate was again taken up at FRELIMO's Fourth Party Conference, where many delegates called for a broader official view of local culture. It was finally decided to send research workers out to the villages to document songs and dances and thus preserve the cultural heritage from any further impoverishment.

The decisive changes of a musical tradition are, however, probably not caused by conscious political traditions, but rather by economic and political transformations in society as a whole. In Sweden we know the consequences ensuing from the migration from the countryside to the cities. Today, what remains of our folk music tradition is carried on, in attenuated and often reconstructed form, by folk dance ensembles and local enthusiasts. But it is imported music that people are humming and dancing to. That the revival of interest in folk music and dance in recent years has been possible at all is thanks to the existence of isolated individuals who preserved and passed on the traditions.

The question is what the effect will be on Mozambican musical culture when electricity is brought to the countryside, when batteries are readily available in the local shops and western pop music begins pouring out of every radio set and tape recorder in every village – even the remotest – in the country.

In the larger towns a variety of hybrid musical forms, descended from both western pop music and Anglo-Saxon hymn melodies, have been in evidence for some time.

Included in this last category are the FRELIMO songs – catchy, familiar, immensely popular and a recognized part of the national culture. Their effect, in a few short years, on timbila music was noticed by Martinho Lutherero during a visit to Zafala in 1980. He discovered to his astonishment that many timbila players had re-tuned their instruments to the Western tonic major scale. He also found the cause of the changes: at public meetings the timbila orchestras were expected to accompany FRELIMO songs. The traditional tuning jarred terribly with the melodies. For that reason the musicians had to tune their instruments on the western musical scale.

In the future, the timbila orchestras may have to keep two entire sets of instruments, one set tuned for the mshao and the other for FRELIMO songs and pop music.

This would, however, seem to be a rather expensive and cumbersome expedient. Should the local political leaders start promoting modern music at the expense of the traditional tunes, there is a risk that all the timbila orchestras will retune their instruments in the western way and the old tuning will be forgotten. It means that a whole perception of tonality will disappear for ever. This was certainly not the intention of those musicians who composed the FRELIMO songs.

To be talking about tonal scales at a time when Mozambique is fighting for its survival against right-wing reactionary forces and when people are fleeing for their lives into city slums and over the frontiers may seem absurd. We can only hope that Mozambique will get peace and the possibility to rebuild their country. When that day comes we also hope that researchers will get the resources they have been promised, so that they and the village people can together arrive at an understanding of traditional music and thus provide a basis for a carefully considered cultural policy.

Translation from Swedish Stuart Sheild

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