

Westernization threatens Zimbabwean culture

Shona Music is victim in the struggle to modernize

This past summer, 30 Canadian students embarked on an extensive tour throughout the South African country of Zimbabwe. Organized by the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), the students were selected by the organization on the basis of their academic record, resume and the research topic which they planned to investigate during the trip. One of three York participants in the seminar, **Dwight Lubiniecki**, conducted research on 'ethnomusicology, the study of culture through its music. According to Lubiniecki, Westernization in Zimbabwean culture has resulted in the decline of music, diminishing a very important part of the country's legacy. Zimbabwe is a land made up of many tribes, and in the following feature Lubiniecki concentrates on one of the largest tribes—the Shona people. By outlining the development of music in the Shona culture, Lubiniecki demonstrates how the present education system in Zimbabwe fails to reinforce certain musical traditions. Lubiniecki fears that these customs which were once sacred to the Shona, will be forgotten by future generations in Zimbabwe's quest to modernize.

Handed down from generation to generation like a valuable heirloom, the music of Zimbabwe functions in numerous contexts which underline many, if not all, traditional social events. Music is a means of communication, not just a form of entertainment, and it forms the basis of the hierarchical expression that is an integral part of the Shona culture. Zimbabwe is made up of many tribes, and the Shona is one of the largest.

Given the youth of the country (it achieved its independence in April of 1980), it is understandable that Zimbabwe's first few steps have been in the direction of ensuring economic, political and social growth. However, the intervention and implementation of a Western infrastructure and value system in Zimbabwe has marked a break in the black people's continuum of natural development. This cultural mutation, symbolic of a dramatic shift in the black people's belief system, has resulted in the depreciated assessment and commercialization of music and its related goods.

With the development of speech as a means of transmitting thoughts and emotions, humans were able to express simple ideas that stemmed from the acknowledgement of signals by their sensory receptors. Humans had not only discovered different sounds, they had associated specific meanings along with them. And pronunciation within a language will vary among different cultures. Even the Queen's English is just a style of pronunciation and not any more correct than the next. Through the passage of time, languages evolved, and variations of pronunciation developed within each tribe. In Africa, frequent communication did not occur between other tribes; thus, people had little opportunity to assimilate other influential styles of speech.

All Bantu (African) languages are tonal-based languages. In other words, the "tone" accompanying a verbal pronunciation contains the essence of what is being expressed. English, on the other hand, is referred to as a stress language, where the essence of what is being communicated is contained in words themselves; the



Pictured: A mbira player seated in performance. Photo courtesy *The Soul of Mbira* by Paul F. Berliner.

meaning of a word is given further context by the surrounding words in the utterance. Consequently, those who communicate with a tonal language often complain that people do not understand what they mean. Conversely, those who express themselves using stress languages claim that people do not listen to what they are saying.

For people raised speaking Bantu languages, learning English presents the difficult problem of having to adjust to another language value system. With the employment of the English language in Africa comes the depreciated value of Bantu languages no longer being spoken.

For the Shona people of Zimbabwe, singing is very popular with all ages and exists as an extension to the tonal presentation contained in their speech. Adult singing groups are led by the eldest. In children's groups, where everyone is roughly the same age, the child who has the best voice is chosen as the leader. The relationship between the leader and the rest of the singers exists as a kind of question and answer format, with the leader chanting a phrase (much like a

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question) and the other singers replying as if in answer to the leader.

Although singing traditionally occurred at any time of the day and existed intrinsically as a means of entertainment, songs often accompanied dance, functioning as a means of maintaining rhythm. The rhythm of the dance determined the tempo of the song, and in turn songs served to accent various parts of the dance steps.

The Mbira (often incorrectly referred to as the thumb piano) is the national instrument of Zimbabwe, its origin dating back to over a 1,000 years ago. According to traditionalists, Mbira music is the music (or soul) of the ancestral spirits who play an active role in the lives of present day musicians.

The Shona people considered the theft of an Mbira to be a very serious crime; a man could be required to offer one of his daughters in compensation for having stolen the instrument. Although today many of these traditional practices are in fast decline, specific rituals are still carried out whereby one must inform one's ancestors (through a special ceremony) of the loss or theft of the instrument. When one finds a new gourd, which is a hollowed-out African pumpkin used to amplify the volume of the instrument, one must prepare traditional beer and inform one's ancestors of one's good fortune.

In the late 19th century, European missionary movements challenged the prominent positions of Mbira players in Shona society by promoting negative stereotypes. Ethnic musicians were considered to be uneducated, lazy, beer-drinking heathens, and a strong movement to convert Africans to Christianity forced many would-be performers to give up playing; boys would be beaten if their teachers suspected that they played an Mbira. However, the strong link between the Mbira and the Shona people eventually led to the easing of attitudes by the Christian church.

Today, the Kwanongoma College of Music in Bulawayo instructs student teachers in the playing and teaching of various instruments. In addition, the school is one of the last places where one can learn the slowly-declining art of manufacturing and performing the Mbira and the Marimba.

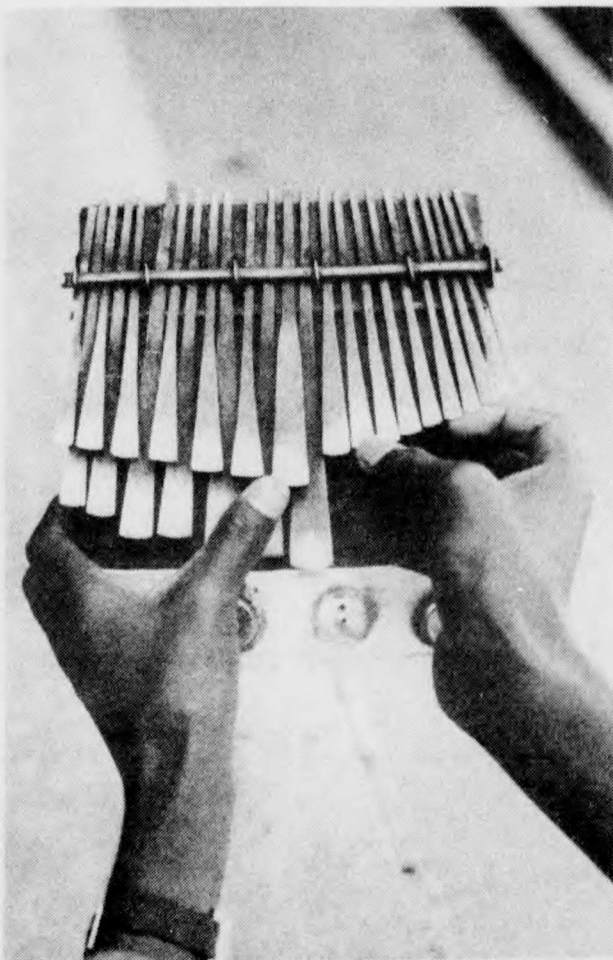
Learning to read music, as well as mandatory instruction in chording on the piano, are included in the syllabus, although students seldom use these skills later as teachers. Interestingly enough, a piano is never available at the schools where these students secure employment after graduation. Pianos are a costly item and many schools cannot afford the purchase, let alone the expense of the constant tuning and maintenance that is required.

As further evidence of Westernization, Mbiras are no longer made with materials that would have been considered appropriate by Shona ancestors. Bottle caps have replaced sea shells and bones to produce the wanted "buzzing" or "vibrating" effect that characterizes the instrument's sound. Furthermore, the once-traditional gourds (used to amplify sound) are now being

replaced by plastic facsimiles. Although some of these changes may simply be a reflection of the extremely practical nature of Zimbabwe people, and the employment of modern materials such as plastic, fiberglass, and nylon may produce marked improvements over materials previously utilized, these changes render the instrument aesthetically cheap and unworthy of association with highly-prized ethnic musical instruments.

Changes in instrumentation have brought about additional changes in the style of commercial African music. Many black performers use the guitar to play music in a manner that is much like music performed on the Mbira. Combinations of Bantu lyrics with complicated rock and Caribbean rhythms have also emerged as the desired standard. Fast-paced tempos make the music definitely lively and interesting. Simple musical themes develop in the introduction of the songs and remain consistent throughout, and lyrics speak about anything from the independence of Zimbabwe to enjoying Zimbabwe's greatest cultural pleasures. Both lyrics and melody share the limelight in terms of importance within the song, but the repetitive structure that is particular to this style of music is still easily recognizable.

Zimbabwe's Ministry of Education has no plans of including music in its syllabus. The re-vamped emphasis on providing children with a more formal education could result in successfully defamiliarizing children with various ethnic practices. Many cultural traditions, especially music, seem to be losing importance in the country. In the process of achieving its independence, Zimbabwe seems prepared to cut off its nose in order to save its face—or, in other words, discard its music to ensure a better economic and political future. It is unfortunate that, in order for a country to successfully defend itself from domination by foreign governments, it must adopt value systems originating from the people who, at one point in history, exploited their country.



The playing technique of the mbira dzavadzimu. The Shona people consider the theft of mbira to be a very serious crime. A man could be required to offer one of his daughters in compensation for having stolen the instrument.