

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE MBIRA IN BRAZIL

from

DAVID THIERMANN, 604 S. Topanga Canyon Blvd, Topanga, California 90290,
U.S.A.

... I learned to play the mbira in Tanzania and have been very fond of it ever since. . . . Last year I had the pleasure of playing it with Pete Seeger at the Berkeley Folk Festival, at the University of California. I was surprised how well it carried over the loud speakers to an audience of about 7 000. While I was still in Tanzania, the National Radio there asked that I do a performance on the mbira and it turned out so well it was broadcast twice. . . . During the summer of 1970 I travelled to Haiti and Jamaica looking around for mbiras. I didn't find any but I did find lots of *marimbulas*, huge mbiras that you sit on top of and pluck the spokes between your legs. It is used as a bass musical instrument together with the Haitian drum and banjo. It is described extensively in "Los Instrumentos de la Musica Afro-Cubana", Vol. 5, Cardenas y Cia, Habana, 1955, by Fernando Ortiz.

In 1969 a lady in San Francisco heard me playing my mbira and proceeded to give me one she had obtained from a friend in Brazil. In appearance it was very old, but I have no way of dating it. It has bamboo spokes and is constructed with a leather back and sides, reinforced inside by more bamboo. Somehow I decided at that point that I'd like to come to Brazil some day and look around for some more of the mbiras.

My first clue that there may have existed a lot of mbiras in Brazil occurred when I visited the Museum Castro Maya in Alto Boa Vista, Rio de Janeiro. This museum houses one of the best original collections of Debret, a French painter, who lived in Brazil between 1816 and 1831. Out of all the musical instruments that he painted in detail at the time, his drawings of the mbira were the most frequent. Perhaps this is because he was especially fascinated by the mbira, but I think there is more to it than that. For one thing, other painters were also enthusiastic about the mbira. An example:

"Segundo Desenhos Feitos Pelo Tenente Chamberlain, Vistas e Costumes da Cidade e Arredores do Rio de Janeiro em 1819 — 1820", published in London in 1822 . . . p. 39: "The Negro on the left, bearing a load of wood, is amusing himself along the Road with his favourite *Madimba de Btsche*, a Congo musical instrument, formed of a number of narrow thin flat pieces of iron, a little bent at the end where struck, securely fastened to a square piece of Board, on the underside of which is a calabash, or gourd, ornamented with a string of coloured beads, or gaudy coloured Worsted. The pieces of iron are of various lengths, and are played upon by both thumbs. The notes produced are agreeable and harmonious and in the hands of some of the performers the music is by no means despicable." (I have also seen it called *otchissage* and the author claimed it was made from oak.)

Lydia Cunha, a famous Brazilian painter during the colonial times, published her "Lembrança do Brasil" in 1846. It included frequent scenes of the mbira being used in black dances. And Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira drew detailed sketches of the mbira in "Viagem Filosófica as Capitanias do Grão-Pará, Rio Negro, Mato Grosso e Cuiabá", first published in Rio in 1783 (see Fig. 1).

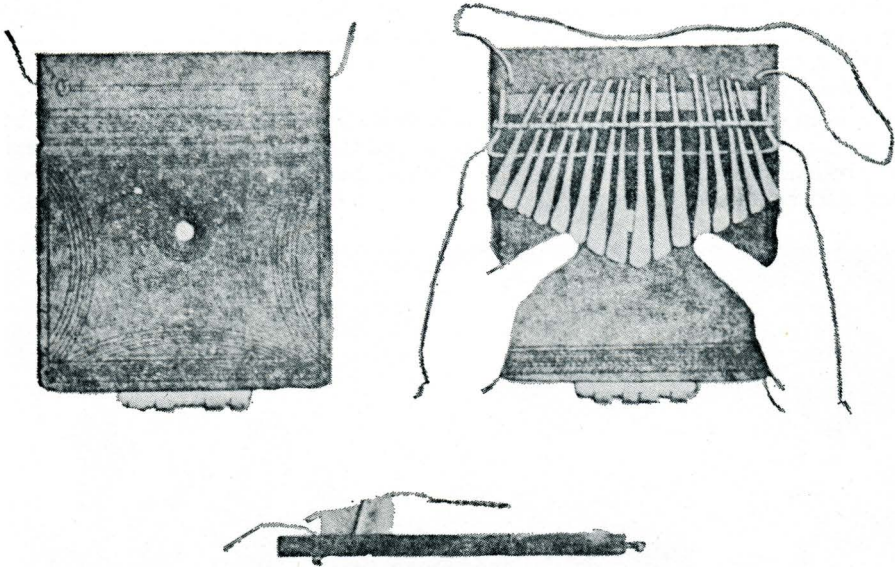


Fig. 1 MARIMBA, instrumento musical dos prêtos. Estampa XLIX Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, "Viagem Filosófica às Capitanias do Grão-Pará" Rio Negro, Mato Grosso e Cuiabá, Vol. 1.1783

Marimba, musical instrument of the blacks. Printed by XLIX A.R.F., "Philosophical journey to the flagships of the Grão-Pará".

Out of the many drawings of mbiras that I have seen in Debret's paintings, . . . I especially chose these two because they demonstrate the utility of the mbira in Brazil at that time. In Fig. 2, a duet is being performed on the mbiras accompanied by a percussion instrument called the reco-reco. Even though there is absolutely no sign of the mbira being used today during Carnival, or anywhere else for that matter, it is very likely that the mbira was the most popular percussion instrument used in the early stages of Carnival in Rio in the early 1800's.

In Fig. 3 one notices the use of the mbira in the transportation of coffee. Referring to the notes on Fig. 3, it seems that the mbira was the instrument used to "encourage the men with improvised songs". By keeping up a rhythm on the mbira with the thumbs, a foreman was hired to take the pain out of the long journey to the coffee market. By hypnotizing the workers with a repetitious tune on the mbira, the hired foreman succeeded in leading the coffee caravan long distances without resting, much in the same way a marching band would lead an army to battle with fife and drum. Incidentally, Brazil later became the leading producer of coffee in the world, and I like to think it was at least in part due to the music of the mbira! In other Debret prints the mbira is shown worn around the musician's neck when not in use. In this way it acted as a sort of talisman, beautifully decorated with relics to ward off evil spirits.

The question at hand for me has been this: why did the mbira, which was so popular at one time in Brazil, completely die out? Granted, industrialization and Christianity, especially Catholicism, had a great effect, but other less popular musical instruments like the *birumbau*, *cuica*, *agogo* and many others survived. Perhaps the mbira was not loud enough for the later carnivals which attracted noisy crowds. Certainly, once coffee marketeers began using other forms of transportation than men on foot, the hired musician who also acted as foreman for the caravan lost his job. And with him went the mbira and its popularity and specific utility.

Both Luis da Camara Cascudo and F. Acquarone listed the mbira in their publications (see *zimba* or *sansa* in the Notes below). Although these publications were from the early 1950's, the authors did not specify when they last saw actual examples of the mbira being played in Brazil.

I have been searching for surviving mbiras in Brazil for the last five months, and I have failed to discover a single example. I have consulted the musicologists and ethnologists at the Museums, in the libraries, both in Rio and Salvador, the latter which has the greatest African influence in Brazil, and no one, but no one, has even seen or heard of the



Fig. 2 CENA DE RUA DO RIO DE JANEIRO NA ÉPOCA DO CARNAVAL.¹

“O carnaval no Rio de Janeiro e em tôdas as provincias do Brasil não lembra, em geral, nem os bailes nem os cordões barulhentos de mascarados que na Europa comparecem a pé ou de carro nas ruas mais frequentadas, nem às corridas de cavalos chucros tão comuns na Itália. Vi, durante a minha permanência, certo carnaval em que alguns grupos de negros mascarados e fantasiados de velhos europeus, imitaram-lhes muito jeitosamente os gestos, ao cumprimentar à direita e à esquerda as pessoas instaladas nos balcões; eram escoltadas por músicos negros e igualmente fantasiados.”

STREET SCENE IN RIO DE JANEIRO AT CARNIVAL TIME.

Carnival in Rio de Janeiro and in all the provinces of Brazil does not recall, in general, the balls or the noisy lines of maskers which in Europe appear on foot or by carriage in the busiest streets, nor the horse races so common in Italy. I saw, during my stay, a certain carnival in which various groups of negros, masked and dressed up (like old Europeans), imitated their gestures very skilfully, greeting the people in their balconies to left and right; they were escorted by black musicians in equally fancy dress.

¹ Both figures 1 and 2 are from: Debret, Jean Baptiste, 1768—1848, “Viagem Pitoresca e Historica ao Brasil: 1816—1831”, textos gravuras selecionadas por Ariosto Augusto do Oliveira; introdução de Myriam Ellis, São Paulo, Melhoramentos 1971, 108 pp., ill. 26cm.

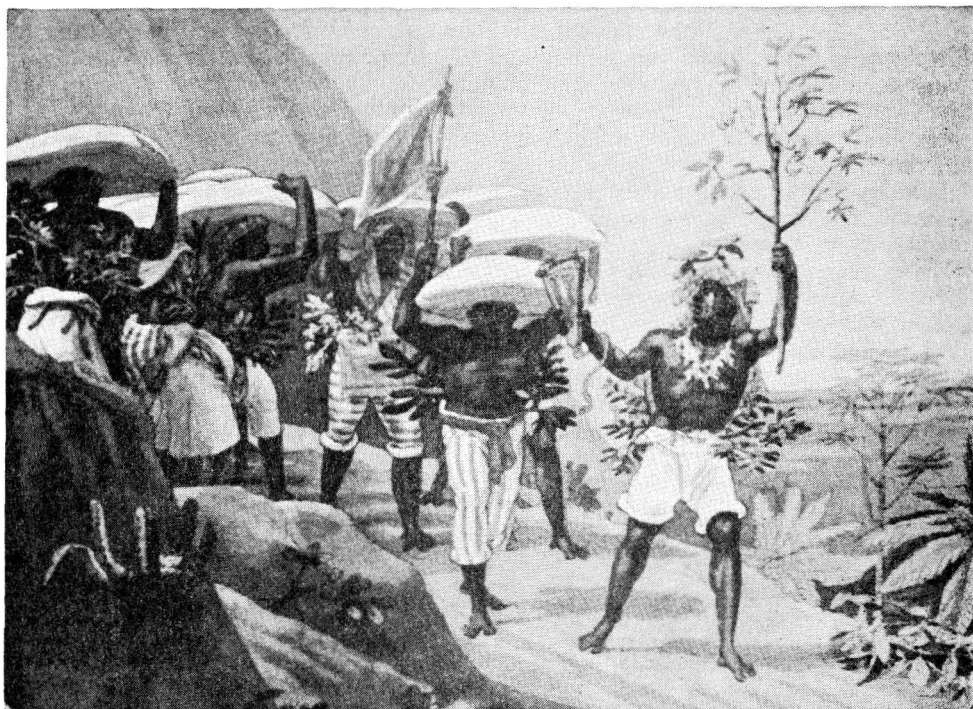


Fig. 3 TRANSPORTE DO CAFÉ

“O cafeeiro, êsse útil arbusto conhecido há apenas 60 anos no Rio de Janeiro, cultiva-se atualmente com cuidado no Brasil, tendo-se tornado, graças à sua boa qualidade, um excelente negócio para o fazendeiro, pois o café da Província do Rio de Janeiro, principalmente, rivaliza com o Moka no preço

Quanto ao transporte, penoso muitas vèzes em virtude da extensão do trajeto faz-se mister para efetuá-lo sem inconvenientes, não sòmente um número de carregadores igual ao de sacos, mas ainda um capataz entusiasta, capaz de animar os homens com suas canções improvisadas. Em geral, o primeiro carregador é o porta-bandeira e se distingue por um lenço amarrado a uma vara. Tôda a coluna é guiada pelo capataz que costuma munir-se de um chifre de boi ou de carneiro; é êste troféu, para êle, um talismã contra tôdas as infelicidades que poderiam ameaçar a marcha do grupo, um amuleto que alimenta sua verborragia com a qual êle se impõe à superstição de seus soldados ocasionais. Entretanto, depois da coluna chegar a seu destino e ser paga, a igualdade volta a imperar e a confraternização se faz na venda mais próxima.”

COFFEE TRANSPORTATION

The coffee tree, this useful bush known for only 60 years in Rio de Janeiro, is at present cultivated with care in Brazil, having become, thanks to its high quality, an excellent business for the planter, seeing that the coffee of, mainly, the Province of Rio de Janeiro rivals Mocca in price.

As to its transportation, painful very often by virtue of the length of the journey, not only a number of porters equal to that of the sacks is necessary to carry it out without difficulty, but also an enthusiastic foreman, who is able to encourage the men with his improvised songs. Generally the first porter is the flag-bearer and is distinguished by a handkerchief attached to a stick. The whole column is led by the foreman who usually provides himself with an ox or sheep's horn; this trophy is for him a talisman against all misfortunes which could threaten the group's progress, an amulet which feeds the verbal output with which he imposes himself on the superstition of his part-time soldiers. Meanwhile, after the column has arrived at its destination and been paid, equality rules again and brotherhood is reasserted at the nearest tavern.

mbira in this country. The art historians had no idea what this little box was in Debret's paintings, despite the fact that it is the most frequently occurring instrument in his works. The only reason I noticed it was because I was looking for it.

I did have one small clue that the mbira might still be played somewhere in Brazil. An old German musician now living in Rio claimed that he saw Brazilian Indians living in the interior town of Goiania near Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, playing the mbira ten years ago. Humorously enough, he was certain that the mbira was an Indian instrument. Who knows?

Notes

"Dicionario do Folklorico Brasileiro" by Luis Da Câmara Cascudo, Rio 1954:

Sansa: Cuia ou casco de jabuti, coberta de uma pranchêta de madeira, onde são fixadas tiras metálicas. Toca-se com os dedos. Instrumento africano trazido pelos escravos para o Brazil.

(Gourd or turtle shell, covered by a thin piece of wood, to which is attached thin strips of metal. It is played with the thumbs. African instrument, brought to Brazil by the slaves.)

"Historia da Musica Brasileira" by F. Acquarone, Rio 1948.

p. 133: *Sanza* ou *ximba* é uma pranchêta grossa, geralmente ôca, sôbre a qual se acham prêsas, por uma das extremidades algumas lâminas de ferro forjado (7 a 10), de vários tamanhos. Descansado sôbre um cavalete fixo, essas lâminas são postas em vibração pela extremidade livre. Algumas vezes, a pranchêta não é ôca; nesse caso, geralmente, o instrumento tem uma cabaça servindo de caixa de ressonância. Toca-se segurando a prancheta com as duas mãos e abaixando as lâminas com os polegares, para em seguida soltá-las. Muito divulgado na Africa Equatorial.

(The *sanza* or *ximba* is a thick piece of wood, generally hollow, on which are found fixed to one end seven to ten beaten iron strips of various sizes. Resting on a fixed bridge, these strips are set in vibration at their free end. Sometimes the body is not hollow; in this case the instrument generally has a gourd serving as resonator. It is played holding the body with the two hands and pressing down the strips with the thumbs, then immediately releasing them. Very widespread in equatorial Africa.)

The musical situation in Uganda, after the 1966 event when Obote appointed himself president, has been described by Gerhard Kubik (*African Music*, 1968, p. 59). The harsh political climate crippled musical activities. When I asked a famous Ganda musician in August, 1970, to sing a song about the Kabaka, he refused, saying, "There are too many spies around". Although the music did not disappear, its original social framework broke down, and music being played just for tourists is likely to deteriorate. The Amin *coup d'état* in January, 1971 did not bring things back to where they were before 1966, but for the Baganda the situation improved. The palace at Bamunanika, outside Kampala, which was partly destroyed by Obote's army, has now been rebuilt and when the young prince Ronnie Mutebi stayed there this summer before leaving for studies in England, he was surrounded by a number of musicians. I do not know exactly how many because the safety precautions were rigorous. But I know that the *Amakondere* gourd horn band stayed at the palace blowing their short, intricate signals at certain times of the day. Outside the palace people were singing, dancing and drumming ("Kabaka yeka . . ."). At the burial of the late Kabaka Edward Mutesa, who died in exile in London, many hundreds of *Amakondere* players and drummers performed. People came to Kampala on lorries, each lorry having at least four drums plus rattles and horns. The burial was a great musical event according to a Muganda friend of mine.

SOREN TORNVIST.