

CEWA¹ CONCEPTS OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

by

G. T. NURSE

In 1965 the Cewa novelist John W. Gwengwe published, ostensibly as a school text-book, a work called *Kukula ndi Mwambo*. The title may be interpreted either as *Growth and Custom* or *Growing is Custom*. The book explores many aspects of the development and training of the children of a Cewa village, among them their introduction of music as part of village life. For this purpose the author provides a classification of musical instruments which is remarkably similar to that of Hornbostel and Sachs. Whether this is an example of indigenous ingenuity or, as has been suggested, the outcome of one of Dr. Tracey's informative visits to Malawi, is uncertain; whatever the case, it is good evidence of the acceptability of this classification in a village *milieu*.

Gwengwe divides all musical instruments (*zombaimba*) into four broad families (*mabanja*):

- (1) of the kind which have strings (*za mtundu wa zokhala ndi Zingwe*);
- (2) which have a skin (*za mtundu wa zokhala ndi Cikopa*);
- (3) which give out air (*za mtundu wa zouxira Mphweya*);
- (4) which are tapped, rattled or scratched (*za mtundu wa zogogoda, wa zowayasa ndi wa zokhodoba*).²

The list he gives of the instruments occurring in the village is naturally limited; there are many more to be found in Malawi than are likely to be encountered in the narrow compass of a single village, especially one as isolated and conservative as that which serves as the wholly convincing setting of his story.

It is interesting to consider some of the most common instruments of the region with reference to this classification, and to explore the degree to which the verbal associations of their names may affect or be affected by their being placed in the various families.

In the Cewa phrase describing the first family we come at once upon an extremely interesting morpheme, *-ngwe*, the root of many words concerned with string or cords. Together with the verb stem *-lira*, cry out, it occurs in the name *kalirangwe*, a single-stringed plucked instrument played either with the fingers or with a piece of stiff grass. It is also found in the names *pangwe* and *bangwe*, of zithers consisting of tendons stretched on a board sometimes inserted into a resonating container; in the former the strings are held down with one hand and plucked with the other, while in the latter small pieces of palm-wood are used to vary the length and tension of the strings. These instruments are sometimes confused with the *phango*, which is of the same family but has only one string, stretched along a stick to one end of which a gourd is attached; it is played by plucking with a piece of wood. The *-ngo* element here relates to the straight slenderness of the wood, not to the string; it is found in such words as *cikongolo*, a long piece of firewood, *mngole*, a tall thin coconut palm, and *bango*, a reed. It is probably again due to the thinness and straightness of the stick supporting the single string that it occurs in the name *mngoli*, a one-stringed fiddle, played with a bow.

With this example we come across a phenomenon not uncommon in Cewa musical instrument names. Certain words in a number of Bantu languages are subject to metathesis, a change consisting of a transposition of consonants with little or no alteration in meaning. It is illustrated rather well in the contrast between two of the words re-

¹ Cewa is the name now officially given in Malawi to the language previously known as Nyanja.

² Gwengwe, John W.: *Kukula ndi Mwambo*. 1965.

lated to *mngoli*. The Ur-Bantu root postulated on unexceptionable grounds by Meinhof³ for the verb "to be straight" is *-lunga*, whereas the Cewa equivalent is *-ngola*; there is also an ideophone *golo*, of straightness, plainly having a similar derivation but lacking the nasalization of the *g*. Both metathesis and denasalization may be detected in *kaligo*, the alternative name for *mngoli*; the two names are consequently basically very nearly the same.

The *gumbu* or *gombo* is an instrument similar to *kalirangwe* and *phango* but not plucked with the fingers; instead the single string is either plucked or tapped with a stick. The latter method of playing was probably the original one, as both syllables of the first form of the name, and the first syllable of the second form, resemble ideophones which have to do with striking: *-gu*, of thudding, *mbu*, of thumping, and *go*, of knocking. The terminal vowel of the second form is probably euphonic, and we should therefore expect the first form to be the older.

The names of two stringed instruments indicate that they are almost certainly of foreign introduction. The *zexe* harp is found also among the Tumbuka and in Tanzania⁴ under that name, which neither sounds likely to be Cewa or Tumbuka nor has any discernible connection with any other work in either language — or, for that matter, in Lomwe or Yao. There is less uncertainty about the provenance of *mkangala*, the mouth bow played by women, which is found especially in areas with large Ngoni populations and is identical with the Zulu *ngangala*. Though both these instruments are quite common in Malawi, neither merits further description in this enquiry.

The second family consists only of the drums. The names of these have been dealt with in a previous issue of this *Journal*⁵; they contain rather more ideophonic elements, and more frequently relate particularly to the onomatopoeic ideophones, than do the names of the other instruments. Some drum names and their related ideophones refer to rhythm and timbre rather than to pitch; a few have connotations of a characteristic, most commonly steadiness or firmness, regarded approvingly in the instrument or its performance. Owing to the abundance of originally ideophonic initial syllables many of these names fall into noun class 1a; most of the rest are found in class 3.

African wind instruments, the third family, are on the whole rather less interesting than any of the others. Some are capable of producing only a single note, and that generally so loudly that all other sounds are drowned. Of this type are *khweru*, a kind of dog-whistle made from a reed, *mbetete*, a somewhat larger horn (that of a kudu) which can with great effort produce a couple of harmonics as well as the fundamental. The functional nature of *khweru* can be seen in its relationship to *khwe*, of gathering together; its note is a shrill summons, hardly part of the music at all. *Khwe* is linked through denasalization and devocalization with the *-ngwe* radical, but reflects function rather than physical form; there is a more forcible version *gwe*, and the extended ideophone *ngwekere*, of the binding together of sticks, combines both ideas. The *-ngwe* radical can be detected in the name *lingwere*, of Pandean pipes closely resembling the traditional instrument of southern Europe. *Lingwere* consists of a set of reeds of various lengths tied together with grass strings; it is to these strings, of course, that *-ngwe* refers. The oblique line of the edge may be responsible for the terminal syllable, adding a reference to the verb *-ngwerengwenduka*, slant away.

The associations of the names of the horns cannot be established with any certainty. There is an obvious connection between the *lipenga* trumpet and the verb *-penga*, blow the nose. A kind of bugle perhaps more authentically local than *lipenga* is *mpitirira*, which consists of a hollow reed leading into a gourd cup. This name appears at first to derive from *-pitirira*, continue straight on without stopping, but it has a more ob-

³ Meinhof, C.: *Grundriss einer Lautlehre der Bantusprachen*. 1899.

⁴ Kubik, G.: "The Traditional Music of Tanzania". *Afrika*, viii, 2, 1967.

⁵ Nurse, G.T.: "Ideophonic Aspects of Some Nyanja Drum Names." *African Music*, iv, 2, 1968.

viously fitting connection with the verb *-pipa*, purse the lips, and its associated ideophone *pi*, which refers both to the action and to the whistling sound which may result; possibly also with *piti*, of chasing, and with *-lira*. A more emphatic whistling sound than *pi* is the prolonged rising and falling *psi*: which is the most prominent element in the name of the *psipe* pipe. Rather more decorous and melodious is the *pyo* of the *cipyoliro* flute: this name and its alternative versions, *citoliro*, *toliro* and *poliro*, all contain the *-lir-* radical.

The classification also makes clear the organic separation in the mind of the villager between the instruments of the second and fourth families. The distinction may be clarified by considering the wording of the classification and some of the words used in connection with performance. The first three families are distinguished by structural features; they are regarded as singing (*-imba*), when played they cry out (*-lira*). Some members of the fourth family are recognized as singing, but as a whole it is characterized not by any familial similarity of structure but by the somewhat tentative movements used in playing, rattling (*-wayasa*), tapping (*-gogoda*) and stroking or scratching (*-kobodola*). Not one of the instruments in this family has a name containing the *-lir-* radical. Another reason for their being classed together may also be detectable in their comparative inability to sustain a note, and their lack of resonance when compared with the other families.

Their names show wider permutations of metathesis and of nominal class-contrast than do those of the other instruments. This family is, naturally, a large one, ranging as it does through the lamellophones and xylophones down to the humblest of stone-filled tin cans. Perhaps it can even be held to include the hands when clapping and the feet when stamping; the *gu* and *di* sounds of firm treading are echoed to a certain extent in the *gu* and *di* of deep-toned drums, as are the *ga* and *ka* of clapping in the *ka* of the lamellophone *kalimba* and the *kangabwi* zither and the *ga* of the small drum *garanzji*.

We are indebted to Tracey⁶ and Kubik⁷ for demonstrating that names for the lamellophones fall into several broad and geographically fairly distinct zones which in some areas overlap; among these areas is the southern part of Malawi. The basic term favoured in one of the zones is *mbira*, and this word occurs in the Mang'anja dialect of Cewa for a particular type of lamellophone. The letters *r* and *l* in Cewa both represent the same sound, which occurs in Yao only as *l*; and *mbila* is the name the Yao, also a Malawi people, give to the xylophone. When it is metathesized we get the form *limba*. Had Kubik made use of the concept of metathesis, he might have been able to reduce his categories by one, and thereby to make more apparent the essential unity of the nomenclature in the southern and eastern parts of Africa.

Limba is interesting both as independent noun and radical. There is a verb *-limba*, be strong or firm; and strength and firmness are properties often regarded as desirable in a musical instrument. In the class 14 form *ulimba* and the class 6 form *malimba* this stem refers to a xylophone, though the latter word is used by the Zimba and Phodzo peoples of Malawi for a lamellophone⁸. Both these forms require further examination. It is unlikely that any name for a musical instrument would have originated in class 14, with its almost exclusive content of abstractions; but although Cewa now lacks a class 11, which takes the prefix *lu-*, it contains indications that a class 11 did once exist in it; some of the concrete nouns in class 14 probably represent its remains. To take an example, the Cewa word for grass is the class 14 *udzu*; but its cognate in Yao is *luju*, a class 11 noun, and almost inevitably we find in Yao the name *lulimba* for a lamellophone. Most of the Cewa class 11 nouns seem to have gravitated into class 5, where the *lu-* has been either incorporated into the stem (as in the word *luso*, dexterity or ingenuity) or transformed into class 5 prefix *li-* (as in *lipungulo*, a sort of screw-driver) or both (which

⁶ Tracey, H.: "A Case for the Name *Mbira*". *African Music*, ii, 4, 1961.

⁷ Kubik, G.: "Generic Names for the *Mbira*". *African Music*, iii, 3, 1964.

⁸ Kubik, G.: "Ethnomusological Research in Southern Parts of Malawi". *Society of Malawi Journal*, xxi, 1, 1968.

is what has happened with *lilime*, the tongue). The class 6 word *malimba*, singular in significance though plural in form, would, if it had one, most probably have as its grammatical singular the word *lilimba*, which does not occur. The foregoing can lead us to suppose that it could have represented an intermediate stage away from an original *lulimba*.

Yao cognates and their associated meanings can illuminate this question further. Another Yao word for a lamellophone is *cilimba*, which also means the spur of a cock, or the flat protrusive fin of a fish, in both Yao and Cewa. The obvious conclusion is that the *limba* stem in the languages of Malawi refers to a firm flattish object sticking out — in short, to a lamella. Consequently the earliest names for lamellophones in the country were probably those containing this stem. The contention can be supported by pointing out that the stem occurs in Cewa in a greater variety of forms and over a wider area than *mbira* does. The lamellophone name with the most extensive distribution in Malawi is undoubtedly *kalimba*, which is found not only in all dialects of Cewa but in Tumbuka as well.

Very widespread in Africa, and fairly common in Malawi, is the lamellophone name *sansi*, class 1A, or *nsansi*, class 9. The class 1a form is that favoured by the southern Cewa-speakers, the Mang'anja, while the Cewa proper to the north of them place the name in class 9. It is probably connected with the verb *-sansa*, wipe with a quick movement, or shake off drops of water. There is good evidence for this in an adjoining but only distantly related language. Kubik found a lamellophone called *shitata* among the Lomwe of Moçambique⁹; at first sight this appears to be cognate with the Cewa *cityatya*, which also occurs in Yao and in Makonde, a language which falls into the Yao group. It is easy to see a connection with the Yao ideophone *tyatya*, referring not to the sound it makes but to its physical flatness; the allied Cewa ideophone *tyatyatya* concerns linear prominences, such as ribs seen through the skin of an emaciated man. Yet more convincing than this ostensibly explicit further reference to lamellae is the possibility that the name is more properly linked with *nsansi* through the Lomwe verb *-tatha*, the equivalent and indeed cognate of *-sansa*, in which case the two names have both a semantic and a formal link. It would therefore appear that the motion of performance on the instrument, which the casual observer might regard as pressing or flicking, is perceived by the performer as a rapid wiping. A point against this is that no Lomwe dialect contains a class 7 prefix *shi-*; all have *e-* or *i-* instead. It consequently begins to seem less likely that *shitata* could be an originally Lomwe construction, and the equivalence with *cityatya* may, after all, be genuine.

The commonest name for a xylophone in Malawi is not one of the *limba* series at all. It is a good example of the way in which an onomatopoeic ideophone of some complexity may be used as the radical of a noun. *Gologodo* represents the sound which results when hoes are jangled together; *magologodo* is the name of a rather primitive but widespread six-note xylophone. We may see in the ideophone both the idea of knocking, *go*, and that of dropping, *do*, together with a possible metasthetic reference to the verb *-godola*, pound, or a direct one to the connotations of straightness in *golo*.

The fourth family also includes a number of more obviously percussive instruments. *Nkbwendo* consists of a piece of notched bamboo up and down which a stick is drawn, producing a rather unpleasant rasping noise. Any act of rubbing two things together can be expressed in an ideophone as *nkbwe nkbwe*, and the *ndo* element is found in several words for straight pieces of wood, such as *ndoma*, the central stick of a shield, and *ndon-doloxi*, the long staff used by elderly people. In this family we come again upon the name *pango*, but with the *p* unaspirated and as a member of class 1 a instead of class 5, signifying a rattle made of a hollow pumpkin filled with stones, carried by dancers.

⁹ Kubik, G.: op. cit., 1964.

The *ngo* particle here seems to be a version of *go*, nasalized to convey the dull interior quality of the knocking. Another kind of dance-instrument is represented by *masece*, plural both in form and import; they are small dry gourds filled with dried seeds and tied to the legs. In the singular of this word, *tsece*, the *tse* element may represent an ideophone conveying ideas familiar to us from the lamellophone names, those of scraping or wiping and of being flat; but their application here is doubtful.

A more certain ideophonic reference occurs in the name *mngwili*, small metal bells fastened to the dancers' ankles. The accidental and irregular concussion of hoes is *gologodo*, but when deliberately struck together in time to music they go *ngwi ngwi ngwi*. Another connotation of this word is the recurrent idea of firmness. It is possible that the *nga* of *kangabwi* (which resembles *gumbu*), the *ka* of that instrument, of *kaligo* and *kalimba* and of rhythmical clapping, the *ba* of *bangwe* and the *pa* and *pha* of *pangwe*, *pango* and *phango* may all denote various aspects of the same quality; the three last-mentioned ideophones suggest the ideas of firmness and tightness through being full. Though there is no ideophone *li*, that particle also seems often to be associated with the concept of firmness, as in *-linga*, be of sure opinion or purpose, *malile*, a defined boundary, or *cili*, of firm encirclement. This may be its significance in the verb *-limba* mentioned earlier. It occurs in *mliyu*, another name for a bell, as well as in *mngwili*.

The world of the African villager is often one of such immediacy that he fails to understand the need for placing items in categories, preferring to grasp at superficial similarities when classing objects together, with the result that we sometimes come across such anomalies as the lamellophone called *bangwe* which Kubik found in Moçambique¹⁰ or the massive *limba* zither described by Scott and Hetherwick.¹¹ The classification of the musical instruments of the Cewa in *Kukula ndi Mwambo* is in my opinion of importance because it indicates not only that such a classification is acceptable on the village level but also, being addressed to young villagers in their own language, that coming generations can be trained in precision of thought without necessarily becoming dependent on any other resources than those available in their own immediate environment.

Summary

That the Cewa novelist John W. Gwengwe has incorporated into his book *Kukula ndi Mwambo* a classification of local musical instruments closely resembling that of Hornbostel and Sachs is a good indication that such a classification is acceptable to African villagers. He separates the instruments into four families, stringed instruments, drums, wind instruments and a large family which comprehends all the remainder. Examination of the names of the instruments reveals semantic associations which explain why the fourth family should be so emphatically contrasted with the second: whereas the first three families are classified by their material structure and are said to "cry out", frequently incorporating the *-lir-* radical, which has this meaning, into their names, the fourth family is classified by its modes of performance. Further investigation of the patterns of verbal reference in the names illustrates these distinctions. Strength and firmness have previously been shown to be qualities valued in drums; study of the names shows that they are also considered desirable in the other instruments. Being expressed in the vernacular, the classification in *Kukula ndi Mwambo* is an encouraging example of the extent to which precise categorization is possible using no more resources than are available in the villages.

¹⁰ Kubik, G.: op. cit., 1964.

¹¹ Scott, C., and Hetherwick, A.: *Dictionary of the Nyanja Language*. 1929.