

# CHOPI TIMBILA MUSIC

by

ANDREW TRACEY

It is surprising that Chopi *timbila* xylophone music, one of the complex and organised musics of the world, has attracted so little ethnomusicological attention. Its sound has been known to the world since Hugh Tracey's recordings in 1942/3, published first on 78rpm discs in the late 1940s,<sup>1</sup> and his book *Chopi Musicians*, 1948. Portuguese and other written descriptions from as early as 1560 focus on the visual impression and the instruments.<sup>2</sup> Recent research by Chopi writers focuses on ethnography and the analysis of the lyrics (Munguambe 2000; Jopela, pending). But the music itself?

It cannot be that the Chopi are too far away, too expensive to reach – Chopiland, known as Zavala to the Chopi, is only 350km up the coast from the capital Maputo. What was once a track through the muddy Limpopo flood plain or deep-pitted sand in 1942 is now a fine national road. Perhaps it is simply too difficult, both to play and to hear. 'Overwhelming' is not too strong a word for the effect on most people of the dense blanket of sound of a Chopi xylophone orchestra, sometimes twenty *timbila* entering precisely together after a solo player's lead-in. Or, in the case of the miner workers of ethnic groups from around southern Africa who formerly gathered for weekend dances on the gold mines of Johannesburg – when the Chopi miners came on to perform, the audience would disappear! The music was beyond them.

It is hard to take in at first. It may sound 'all the same' on first hearing.<sup>3</sup> With any human music, once you apply your ear it makes sense, but this one seems to need more application than most. Since the age of six I have loved sitting in the middle of the swirl, following the different *tikhongo* (beaters) of every musician. I was lucky enough to have heard the two legendary musicians Katini and Gomukomu when in 1943 Hugh Tracey brought the small group of *timbila* to Durban, the same group which appears in the frontispiece of his book 'Chopi Musicians'. If you have walked among the players of a steelband as they move towards the stage during Panorama in Port of Spain, Trinidad, you'll know the same feeling of being surrounded in a whirlpool of polyphony. As you move away from the music, whether *timbila* or steelband, you become aware of the hidden melodies singing through, which no one hand or player may be playing as such. Over time, you realise the continual inventiveness of *timbila* composers in the style of

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. the Sound of Africa series, International Library of African Music, <http://www.ilam.ru.ac.za>.

<sup>2</sup> Fernandes, Dias, Junod, Earty, Webster.

<sup>3</sup> The same can be said about the Shona *mbira dza vadzimu*, in fact *is* said by Shona/Ndau mbira players. (But anyone who plays it knows that it's not!)

each movement and the impressive range of this ancient art.

A problem for the Chopi is that their music is also too much for easy acceptance by other Mozambicans. This may be because the unaccustomed sound of the equi-spaced heptatonic scale of the *timbila*<sup>4</sup> leads to harmony which is not based on the sound of the natural harmonic series, as used by most of the bow-based musics of southern Africa. It does, however, often incorporate alternating patterns of two adjacent notes/bichords, as does bow music. But, as in Shona *mbira* music, these are included in larger sound patterns using other chords. Chopi music does have hints of family resemblance with the Shona and Sena, their close northern neighbours who are much more numerous and wide-spread than the fewer than 300,000 Chopi centred in the Quissico district of Inhambane Province in southern Mozambique. *Timbila* music is more varied, nevertheless, than that of its northern neighbours, its composers more regularly productive and innovative. (A Chopi *timbila* performance is essentially political and topical, while Shona/Sena *mbira* music is inherently spiritual and conservative.)

*Timbila* are acknowledged in Mozambique as the first national music. The station signature of Radio Moçambique was for decades a snatch of a *Mtsitso* movement by Shambini Makasa. The Chopi are proud that they are recognised as masters of the xylophone. *Timbila* have played for a century or more at national events in Mozambique. They have made several visits to Portugal, one in 1940 described in Katini's 1942 *Mzeno* movement *Hinganyengisa*, known by most Chopi.<sup>5</sup> Venancio Mbande's orchestra toured Europe with me in 1994 and Venancio has completed several residencies in Europe and the USA. But outside the world of *timbila* musicians there is little sign of serious musically-oriented understanding of their music. *Timbila* won a UNESCO award in 2005 as one of the 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. What is unfortunately equally intangible is any significant reaction to this honour from the national government, in the form of support for the people on the ground who play, dance and compose it. These people are the indispensable key to its survival, not bureaucrats in government structures. For this and other cogent political and economic reasons *timbila* have been in rapid decline since independence in 1975, as witnessed for instance by the attendance at the annual *Festa de Timbila* held at Quissico, the main town of Chopiland, in August each year.<sup>6</sup>

My first teacher was Shambini Makasa, at Mavila in 1962. He made my first *mbila*, a *sanje-2* (one of the four sizes of Chopi xylophones). I played it around the world in the 1960s South African musical revue 'Wait a Minim', together with a *chilanzane* by Mbuziane of Zandamela and a *dibhinda* by Mbilanyane of Mbanguzi. Shambini first

<sup>4</sup> *Timbila* means xylophones (sing. *mbila*), also used for 'xylophone music' in general. For descriptions of the instruments and their tunings see H. Tracey 1948 and A. Tracey 1976, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> H. Tracey, *Chopi Musicians*, OUP 1948, IAI 1972.

<sup>6</sup> This festival is sponsored by Amizava, a small group of Chopi businessmen in Maputo, founded with others by Victor Bernardo, a former government minister and son of traditional musician Bernardo Matimbi of Nyakutowo.

made me aware of the opposition and independence of the two hands in Chopi style. As with learning any new instrument, the first stages of finding my way around it and discovering what two hands could do on it were slow and challenging. The challenge of *timbila* has remained with me. It is no easy instrument. It takes many years of energy and dedication to master. All the top players turn out to have started learning very young.

Venancio Mbande, my especial mentor and friend of over forty years who now lives at Chisiku, started at the age of five, inspired by an uncle. I have watched his own skilled children starting even younger, becoming full members of his orchestra before the age of ten. Strength and speed are a further challenge; however fast one can play informally it always goes faster in performance! Any player (*mveti*), however, is able to simplify his own version (his '*khongo*' or beater in Chopi) of a tune enough to allow him to keep up correctly whatever his skill, or energy, or age, as is possible when one knows the shapes of the music thoroughly. As to the general analysis of the music perhaps there is no master clue, as I believe there is in the case of the ancient *mbira* styles of the Shona and Sena of Zimbabwe and central Mozambique.<sup>7</sup>

Shambini introduced me to some refinements of *timbila* making, one of the significant aspects of which he believed to be the secret and still respected *timbila* medicine called *nyenze*. This he used for treating the inside of his resonator gourds, and also, by incisions on the wrists or between thumb and index fingers of both hands and on the forehead between the eyes, for ensuring brilliance in playing and in *kusika timbila*, the composing for *timbila*. He did not initiate me in this way, however; perhaps this accounts for my mere basic competence on the *mbila* to this day! Venancio, however, a modern man, says "Knowledge is my *nyenze*."

Playing *timbila* one soon finds that there is enormous variety in styles, tonalities, forms, rhythms, combinations, tempos, signals, answers, endings. There are always surprises! Most tunes or pieces (*ndando*, plur. *tindando*) have a song, some such as the *Mitsitso* introductions do not. The music falls into categories according to which 'movement' of the ten to twelve in the *timbila* dance suite (*kusinya timbila* or *mgodo*) it belongs – to use a convenient term analogous to the Western concept of the movements of a symphony. The movements of the *timbila* dance are named and follow a fixed sequence, with some variation according to local custom or the composer's preference, lasting the best part of an hour. Composers are fully recognised; one may refer for instance to the *Mzeno* (movement) of Sathanyane, or the *Mdano* of Mataule, or alternatively to the first words of the song. As described in H. Tracey (1948), the principle is that a new suite is composed every year by the resident composers of each orchestra. In fact this rarely happens as such, but single movements are replaced from time to time, so that after a couple of years an orchestra, if they are keen and have a

<sup>7</sup> I.e. the harmonic sequences. See A. Tracey, "The system of the mbira", *7th Symposium on Ethnomusicology*, ILAM, 1988.

composer, should normally be playing all new material.<sup>8</sup> When there is a new *Mzeno*, that is a cause for celebration. On the other hand, some of the orchestras of old men that one can see these days at the *Festa de Timbila*, still play the old tunes. The depleted Mbanguzi orchestra at the *Festa* in 2007 was playing much the same repertoire as I had filmed thirty four years before in 1973.<sup>9</sup> But, the 2011 *Festa* showed, encouragingly, a number of young people taking up *timbila*.

At this point I should mention the former existence and at the same time the regrettable demise of what Chopi musicians say was their original xylophone, the *chikonje*. I found what was presumed to be the last surviving example played by Zhetiane at Shambula in 1962. Its surprising feature was that it had one low note at the right hand end, out of scale position. The layout was, referring to this notation system: A, D E F G A B C 'D 'E 'F 'C. It is said to have been played during the former *wukwera* boys' initiation, as was *dole*, a now disused orchestral *mbila*. Venancio insists that *chikonje* was separate from the orchestral tradition and could not play together with other *timbila*. "Chingudu", the one song I wrote down, (see Figure 1) hints at a connection with the Shona/Sena *kalimba* lamellophone, but so do many orchestral *timbila* tunes. This song's lyrics translate, 'Chingudu, call your people, what will you eat, you're finished'. (Chingudu is a name used for someone who creates problems.)

The image shows a musical score for the song "Chingudu". It consists of three staves. The first staff is the melody, written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody is marked with four different accompaniment options (1, 2, 3, 4) for the xylophone. The lyrics are written below the melody: "Chingudu, call your people, what will you eat, you're finished". The second and third staves show the four different accompaniment options for the xylophone, each with its own rhythmic pattern and notes.

Figure 1. "Chingudu", Zhetiane's *chikonje* tune, Shambula 1962, 4♩, MM c.108. Four options for accompanying the song and the melody are shown here. (♩ = symbol for beater)

<sup>8</sup> *Timbila* was strictly chiefs' music, until chiefship (*wukoma*) was abolished on independence in 1975. Supportive chiefs, such as Filipe Mbanguzi or Wani Zavala of recent memory, could build up their composers and orchestras to a high level, or of course the converse. The new *timbila* sponsors, where they exist, are Chopi business people such as Amizava, with little support except expressions of intention from government bureaucracy.

<sup>9</sup> Four films on *timbila* made by G. Zantinger and A. Tracey for Penn State University, USA., 1973, 1980, still available from there and from ILAM (<http://www.ilam.ru.ac.za>).

### Notation methods

The five line staff designed for the Western scale works well for other heptatonic scales; here the Chopi equi-spaced *timbila* scale is indicated by the special clef sign. Note that the written notes sound at Chopi, not Western pitch. The scale is built upon the note *Dikokoma da Wumbila*, or No. 1 as the Chopi number it, meaning the key or slat of ‘mbila-ness’, the abstract noun from *mbila*. It is usually found at or near the left-hand, i.e. lower-pitched, end of a *mbila*. It is also the lowest note of nearly all tunes when played in the basic position, that is from Note 1 (written as middle C) to around Note 10 (E), which can be compared with ‘first position’ on a guitar or violin. I have chosen to write it as ‘Middle C’ because:

- a) Middle C in staff notation is the starting note of the essential Western scale without accidentals.
- b) *Da Wumbila*, as it is known for short, sounds not very far from Middle C, at 254 Hz in what Mbande calls his ‘home tuning’ (he tunes by perfect pitch), when I last measured it in 1979. (His ‘mine’ tuning was a little lower.)
- c) This puts the range of the standard *sanje* (*sange* in other Chopi dialects) and *dibhinda* instruments at the most useful level on the stave, without too many ledger lines on the top or bottom.
- d) I use the treble clef note names for their universality; Perhaps future Chopi musicians will want to write down their music using Chopi numbering up from No. 1, but they may use staff notation in any case. I prefer to take advantage of the wide familiarity of this system, at least as regards the writing of pitch.

Rhythm is not so easy, though. This is where staff notation gives up. It should not be necessary to rewrite the rhythm of any of these pieces in various contortions of staff notation in order to prove that none of them will show exactly what to play as clearly as the versions given.<sup>10</sup> The rattle beat gives a good Chopi-oriented reference on which to base a Chopi transcription system. Several rattle players stand in front of the orchestra. Their job is to ensure that all the players and dancers remain co-ordinated. Their beat is very clear, always unison, isochronous and unvaried.

I find that a pulse-notation system works well for *timbila*, assigning 2, 3 or 4 pulses to a rattle beat according to the predominant pulse-feel of a piece, and accepting that musicians often switch between these in one or both hands. One way to grasp any tune, to perceive its length and shape, is to count how many rattle beats there are in one cycle (at least for a foreign listener – Chopi musicians do not count rattle beats). The rattle beat is also the dancers’ reference beat, by which they pace their movements; in fact dancers (*vasinyi*) are able to rehearse quite adequately to the sound of the rattles alone (*njele*, pl. *tinjele*), without *timbila*. This suggests that the dancers’ movement patterns do not necessarily coincide in length with the metrical framework of the *timbila* cycles,

<sup>10</sup> All my system needs is a music software programme that will write it! I welcome suggestions.

which one can in fact observe, notably in the fast movements. Again this principle or characteristic is known in southern African music and dance.

- The form number is given at the beginning of the transcription.  $8\phi$  for instance means eight rattle beats per cycle. The symbol represents the standard Chopi tin can rattle on a stick. The position of the rattle beats is shown by V-ticks along the first line, showing the number of pulses per rattle beat. No other time signature is necessary.
- A double bar shows the end of a cycle. Start again from the beginning. Refer to the double bar to find where you are in partial transcriptions, e.g. when reading the signals and answers.
- Equivalent bars are placed beneath each other. Systems joined by bar lines are played together.
- Most strokes fall with the pulses. If not written on a pulse line, they are played exactly half way between two pulses. In the case of 3:4 (three equal strokes in the time of four pulses) or 4:3 (the converse) the relationship is shown with a 'tuplet'.<sup>11</sup>
- If nothing is shown on a pulse line, nothing happens.
- Left-hand strokes (LH) are shown by white notes, right-hand (RH) by black notes. The colour has no rhythmic significance.
- The special clef symbol means that all notes sound in Chopi equi-spaced heptatonic *timbila* tuning. You can test the movement patterns on any heptatonic xylophone, such as the modern Western-tuned Zimbabwean marimba (as long as its keyboard does not include, as many do, that extra chromatic note F#), but the sound will induce the false impression of Western tonal relationships.<sup>12</sup>
- The MM numbers show an estimated minimum tempo when playing informally. Tempos can be very much faster during a dance performance.
- The first part shown in each case is for the primary xylophone, *sanje*. Then follow other parts which may fill this out, such as *dibhinda*, pitched an octave lower, the signal and answer for *velusa*, or the song.
- The versions of tunes given are nearly all what I wrote down while watching the musician playing alone for the purpose, and confirmed later in many cases by learning to play them myself, alone and in live performance. It is quite impossible to write down extended individual parts from the combined sound of many *timbila* together, and unnecessary since most musicians on hearing an unfamiliar piece can quickly create a playing part that suits their style.

<sup>11</sup> The 'Finale' software term for duplets, triplets, etc. It is quite possible to avoid tuplets by multiplying the number of pulse lines, based on the lowest common denominator of the rhythms of the two hands, but this does not make it any easier to read.

<sup>12</sup> Some urban bands in Maputo use one *mbila* together with Western instruments, as do 'Timbila', the New York group with Nora Balaban (*mbila*) and Banning Eyre (guitar), but the discrepancy between the two tunings either does not bother them or is heard as giving character.

- These versions are all individuals' interpretations, i.e. their own *khongo*, and are not immutable, although many players maintain quite fixed interpretations over time. Players are always free to play with their own '*khongo*', which accounts for the dense aural texture of *timbila*. However, certain parts of all tunes, such as endings and the orchestra's unison answers to the leader's signal (*-velusa*), are played note for note. When there is a song, its melody must at least be hinted at, usually arising from both LH and RH parts.
- No player will play these precise versions throughout a whole piece, so where there are alternative notes that stick closely enough to the pattern shown, they are written in three ways, indicating how often the player is likely to play them. From more to less frequently: a) two notes enclosed in square brackets have equal preference [not both at once!]; b) a note in round brackets; c) a small note in round brackets. Alternative notes replace any other note for that hand on that pulse.
- A line joins a row of alternative notes when they form a sequence.
- An arrow shows that an alternative note may be moved from its normal pulse position.
- Don't imagine that the transcriptions show the whole picture. They are all playable and acceptable in performance, but they are snapshots. I am happy if they lead you on to more understanding and investigating of *timbila*.

My working method for transcribing is mostly to ask a single player patiently to repeat a tune with minimal variation while I write it down as quickly as possible, with breaks for recuperation when necessary – for both of us if it is a difficult piece. With practice, the process became much quicker. At first I would ask the player to play L and R hand separately, but very soon found that this caused inaccuracies, e.g. in the case of 3-against-4 patterns in the two hands, which are discussed further on. This also showed me that *timbila* hand-movement patterns are not necessarily as independently conceived by the player as they may seem to the ear. A very much better method when facing difficulty is to ask the player to turn one stick around and, using one hard end and one soft end, to play the full two-hand movement pattern.<sup>13</sup>

Many pieces I learned to play both alone and in performance with an orchestra, which allowed me to refine what I had written. Later I became able to 'hear' certain pieces and put them straight into my hands without needing to write first. I always check the coordination with the rattle beat, and try to remember to ask for the *velusa* and the ending. For the songs, I take down the words first, then learn from an individual, a live performance or a recording.

Sometimes I have been present when a composer such as Venancio Mbande has been teaching his group a new piece or song. I observed that he does not teach the

<sup>13</sup> Venancio Mbande can be seen doing this in my film 'The Chopi timbila dance', to demonstrate the structure of a tune.

*timbila* parts note-for-note but lets the players figure it out for themselves. However, he is a dominant figure, both in music and in person, and many players copy his style closely. In his home there is often the sound of *timbila* from his many children. They play precisely with Venancio's '*khongo*' when young. From teenage they start to go their own way. I think of him sitting comfortably in his lounge as the senior man he now is, listening and commenting proudly on whichever son or nephew it is playing outside: "That's Londolani ... Ruy ... Domingos ... Ninguem ..."<sup>14</sup>

### Learning *timbila*

Learning *timbila* is almost all by long absorption, not instruction, by self-criticism, playing with other children, taking the chance to grab a pair of beaters when left free. When asked, musicians may say they give a child a pattern such as this:



Figure 2. Learner's exercise, Venancio, 8♩.

or have a child sit in front of them while holding its<sup>15</sup> hands over the beaters. But this is mostly for show. Children learn, they are largely not taught. Just as in African drumming cultures every child knows at least how to sound a drum properly, many Chopi children who live within reach of a *timbila*-playing home can play simple patterns on a xylophone. Here is a simple tune which can be used during *wukwera* boys' initiation:



Figure 3. Tune for *wukwera*, Shambini, 4♩, MM c.192.

One particularly Chopi practice through which a child can be encouraged to learn *timbila* is what they describe as 'spreading the risk', the practice of sending out some of the children to be brought up at other family members' homes scattered around Chopiland,<sup>16</sup> where they can rub up against family members with different talents.

<sup>14</sup> Domingos, now fifteen, started beating on the ground at age three, and was already featured playing with his father's orchestra at six.

<sup>15</sup> Some girls now play *timbila*, such as Venancio's daughter Mariazinha.

<sup>16</sup> David Webster 1975, 2009.



From teenage, when boys start to invent their own *timbila* patterns, they may group together and play the *ngalanga* dance, with one or two *timbila* and three drums. This dance, less stylised and formal than the *timbila* dance, has flourished in the years following independence, when the civil war made it unsafe to gather in numbers.

Pupils of *timbila* sometimes want to learn an ‘easy’ piece first. I have to tell them that there are none! From the start one is faced with fundamental African principles such as independence of the hands and differential grouping of pulses. Below is a *ngalanga* tune I have used as a starter. Written Middle C represents *Dikokoma da Wumbila*. Note that neither hand keeps up a regular beat for long.



Figure 4. Tune for *ngalanga*, Shambini, 8♩, MM c.184.

This article focuses on the music of *timbila*. For details such as the dancing, lyrics and instruments, see H. Tracey 1948, A. Tracey 1976, 1980, Munguambe 2000, Jopela (pending). In what follows a selection of music for all the movements of a standard *timbila* dance is given to show something of the music styles used in each. The general musical sequence inside any movement is: *kuningeta* (to give), the solo introduction by the leader (or by the composer, *msiki*, if he is present), at the end of which the leader gives a signal and the orchestra enters. Then follows a succession of events such as the verses of the song, the successive dance movements, the speed changes in *Mzeno*, each one heralded by *velusa* with its answer (see next para) and finally the end. There is a brief rest period, as long as needed, then the leader starts off the next movement.

*Velusa* is like a knot in the straight grain of a movement, a brief recurring moment in all tunes where the leader gives a signal, using composed notes or merely a subtle change in the way he plays, upon which the orchestra answers with the short, composed, unison answer that belongs to that tune. This is often a version of the left hand part at that point in the cycle.<sup>17</sup> Then they plunge on again with renewed energy. *Velusa* is related to the verb *-vilusa*, to stir up, as in stirring up mud when walking in a lake. The purpose of *velusa* is to warn the performers that something is about to happen, that they are entering another *divingwa* (part, division, section, pl. *mavingwa*) of the piece. This may follow *velusa* immediately, or after a certain fixed number of cycles, depending in each case on the composition. A *mbila* player, sitting in the midst of the loud and complex sound of the orchestra, needs to stay highly attuned to the leader to pick up these signals, and to be able to respond instantly. Listeners inexperienced in hearing

<sup>17</sup> The *velusa* of a *mngeniso* movement is demonstrated in the film “The Chopi timbila dance”, A. Tracey and G. Zantlinger 1980.

*timbila* often wonder, “What happened there?”, “How did they end all together?”, as a result of having missed hearing *velusa*.

Apart from using one’s own ‘*khongo*’, including the kind of small variations shown in these notations, improvisation is expected from anyone who is competent, at certain understood points in all movements, but there are niceties to observe. One should not play with identical ‘*khongo*’ as one’s neighbour – that is considered, as it were, trespassing on what he is doing. It is not stated, but is easy to observe. It is also a standard principle in African drumming. Nor does one play *kudala*, i.e. fast, high improvisation, at the same time as one’s immediate neighbour. This also applies to improvising on the low *sanje* notes of the *mbila*, the ones below *Da Wumbila*. Few players do this anyway during a dance, but more often at home when playing informally. At all times one should support the other players by playing strongly, confidently and consistently, and mostly in ‘first position’ (see above).

### ***Mtsitso* (introduction)**

The *timbila* dance starts with an indefinite number of instrumental *Mtsitso* movements, up to four or more, using *timbila* and rattles alone, without dancing or singing. A composer has the opportunity for originality, often using unusual form numbers other than the usual 8, 12, 16, 24 such as 18, 20, 26, 28, 34 etc. The rattle beat commonly has three pulses, if not then two or four. Tunes with longer cycles are usually played first. *Mtsitso* are often built of irregular metrical ideas. Their forms have more freedom than the later movements which are for dancing, tied to a song, and use standard metrical shapes such as 16 and 24, usually in a balanced A - B form. Here (Figure 5) is a particularly long *Mtsitso* of 34 beats. Its shape is A - B - C - B - C - B2.

Figure 5. *Mtsitso* by Venancio, film 'The Chopi timbila dance 1980', 34ϕ, MM c.112.

Most *Mtsitso* start with a teasing 'short start' – the leader plays his virtuoso solo opening introduction upon which the orchestra respond with their answer and immediately stop! Then the leader starts again in the same way, but more briefly, and they all continue this time into the full number. There is always something new, inventive and surprising to watch out for in the latest compositions. Two tunes may be butted together without a pause with a change of tempo, there may be a snatch of unaccompanied song, a new irregularity or a new take on the *velusa*. There is a characteristic 'hook' idea, which starts the cycle and may repeat at uneven intervals and at different pitch levels, as in Venancio's favourite *Mtsitso* below (Figure 6), composed about twenty years ago. Against the normal practice, he has used it ever since. It is as good as his 'signature tune'. The *dibhinda* part shows how complex ideas can be simplified in other parts. (*Dibhinda* beaters are heavy, or a player may not be skilled.) The answer is at the end of the cycle; the ending starts at the end of the first line. Venancio, talking about his own technique, is proud of his strong left hand which is particularly busy here.

Figure 6. *Mtsitso*: Venancio's signature tune 20 $\phi$ , MM c.132. [CD track 1]

As to the cyclicity of Chopi *timbila*: unlike other more strictly circular African music there is no doubt about where the cycle starts. The entry point of the orchestra on the first stroke of any tune could not be clearer. Endings and *velusa* too are precise, in unison, on a signal. To me, this concords with the character of the Chopi people. Here (Figure 7) is a relatively simple *Mtsitso* of 12 duple beats. The interest here is the answer, the four marked LH notes. On a signal, these are played with left hand alone by the group each time around, while the leader, Venancio himself, or more recently his son Londolani, solos a vigorous, high *kudala* for a dozen or so cycles. On a further signal all return to the full pattern and the same four notes are used as the ending.

Figure 7. *Mtsitso* by Venancio, Kenge 1973, 12 $\phi$ , MM c.192. [CD track 2]

A pattern much used in *timbila*, also found in other musics of southern Africa and the islands<sup>18</sup>, is a series of 3-pulse groupings with each second pulse delayed. The pattern has a name in Britain, where it is known as the ‘jig’ dance rhythm, referring to the net overall sound of the pattern, written in 6/8 time.<sup>19</sup> However in southern Africa the pattern is often felt as two individual parts combined, e.g.

1) 1     •     •     4     •     •     2) 1     •     •     •     5     •  
 ♪           ♪           ♪           ♪           ♪           ♪

It is one of the many African manifestations of two against three. Figure 8 is an example of a whole *Mtsitso* consisting of this one pattern, played 16 times. Here I write it economically as a 3-pulse pattern which puts the second stroke between the pulse lines. (Writing it as 6 pulses is possible but gets clumsy.)



Figure 8. *Mtsitso* by Mataule, film ‘Mgodo wa Mbanguzi 1973’, 16♩, MM c.116.

Notice the way the ‘jig’ pattern is split between the hands. It changes continually between L and R. This can lead to a series of equal-spaced strokes, such as the characteristic R hand line of this tune, B-C-D-C-B in the identical bars 3 and 4, which supports a duple feel (two strokes per rattle beat) while the triple feel always remains in the other hand (three pulses per rattle beat). This sound, fundamentally different from the British jig, is typical of *timbila*.

If we take two of these patterns together, e.g. the first half of Bar 1 in Figure 8, and write them out in full with six pulses each, it will make the discussion clearer.

RH	x	•	•	x	•	•	x	•	•	•	x	•	
LH	x	•	•	•	x	•	•	•	•	•	x	•	•

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Xhosa, Shangaan etc. bow, Shona/Sena *mbira*, *séga* music of Mauritius.

<sup>19</sup> The pattern is much used on the Shona/Sena *mbiras* in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, notably the *matepe/hera*. When a tune is fingered in a continuous stream of alternate pulses from left and right thumb, every second pulse of three is slightly delayed, with the effect of marking the normal 3-pulse dance beat more clearly. With the *mbira dza vadzimu*, it also supports the *hosho* rattle part, and can be used to show the *hosho* player where the beat should be.

When playing in a relaxed or casual way (*kuveta ndota, kusakana*) this is fine. But when pressure, speed or the composition require it, *timbila* players bring the last two strokes back by one pulse. This may only be a small difference but it has the effect of changing the pattern significantly. Unlike before, both hands are now playing regular, equal-spaced beats, in a 3:4 relationship.

RH	x	•	•	x	•	•	x	•	•	x	•	•	[4 equal strokes]
LH	x	•	•	•	x	•	•	•	x	•	•	•	[3 equal strokes]

I find this a good way of approaching this Chopi sound, for both hearing and playing it, i.e. going via the ‘jig’ sound as a combined 2-hand pattern, then equalising the strokes of both hands independently. As to writing it accurately, the strokes of the resulting 3:4 pattern can be spaced out evenly between the existing pulse lines, or if more accuracy is needed the number of pulses can be doubled to six. Whether they are still ‘pulses’ in the general sense I use the word in southern Africa is debatable. I think not. The pattern arises from the need for regular, independent movement, not from an all-pervading background sense of pulse. But they remain useful if only conceptually and for writing. Most important is to use the musicians’ own concepts: for *timbila* we start from the rattle beat. Other tunes using this pattern (often omitting one stroke of the faster, 4-stroke, hand) are the *Mdano* below and several of the *Mizeno*.

### *Mtsitso (wokudana vasinyi) (mitsitso to call the dancers)*

The last *Mtsitso* introduction, which may have a short song, is usually when the dancers enter onto the dance ground, although strictly it is the next movement that is named *Mngeniso* (entry). Here (Figure 9) is an example of a last *Mtsitso*. The relaxed mood of the *mitsitso* is already making way for the fast tempos and excitement of the coming dance movements. The parallel movement on the syllables ‘-sa mka-ta’ is found in song-derived tunes associated with Shangaan style, the Chopi’s southern neighbours of Zulu ancestry. However bars 2 and 3 with their alternation of two bi-chords (B D and A C) are in straight Chopi style, while also being paradigms of the most common Shona chord change. *Timbila* music on the whole avoids parallel movement to adjacent steps.



Figure 9. *Mtsitso wokudana vasinyi* “Dzinginisa mkatako” by Makauziane, film ‘Mgodo wa Mbanguzi 1973’, 12♩, MM c.220. ‘How you arouse your wife is your business’.

***Mngeniso, Mgeno (entry)***

A fast, rousing movement, in which one drum is used to draw attention to the start of the dance proper, a *nzoma* middle-sized, pegged, closed drum with a round bottom end which can be set to stand in the deep sand of Chopiland, played with sticks and hand<sup>20</sup> (only in this movement, because the players say it drowns their instruments). *Mngeniso* is the first of the three very fast movements, with *Chibhudhu* and *Mabandla*. As if to show their eagerness to play, the orchestra often seems to interrupt the end of the leader's introduction when they enter. The drum plays entirely with the irregular dancers' movements, not with the *timbila* phrasing. As in the other fast dance movements, the song is usually only one short line, sung two or three times just before the end. This *Mngeniso* and a live demonstration of its *velusa* signal and answer can be seen in the film 'The Chopi Timbila dance'<sup>21</sup>

Figure 10. *Mngeniso* "Hingani zwee" by Venancio, film 'The Chopi timbila dance' 1980, 16ϕ, MM c.192. 'Be quiet, hear the timbila of Wildebees (Mine), these timbila sound sweet...'

<sup>20</sup> See the film "Mgodo wa Mkandeni" 1973.

<sup>21</sup> A. Tracey/Zantzinger 1980, available on DVD from ILAM.

**Mwemiso (-ema, to stand), Chidanwana (little call)**

Also featured in the film, 'The Chopi timbila dance', the tempo relents a little, allowing the dancers to sing more extensive lyrics. The song melody drops stepwise through the seven notes of the scale (C to D), a frequent feature of song in the heptatonic musics of the region, Chopi, Venda, Shona etc. See also *Mngeniso*, *Mdano*, *Mzeno* of Sathanyane, *Mzeno* (Webster). Note the hints of Shona chord movement, e.g. in bar 2 the bi-chords B and D, in bar 4 C and E.

The musical score consists of five staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a box containing the number '16'. Above the staff are seven 'V' marks. The notes are: G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3. The second staff continues the melody with notes: G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G4. The third staff contains the lyrics: Ba - ye - tha - ni va Mba - ngu - zi. The fourth staff contains the lyrics: Mo - wo - na cha - ni ho - wo - na gu - ve - ra - nga. The fifth staff contains the lyrics: -bwa - ra.

Figure 11. *Mwemiso* "Bayethani" by Mataule, film 'Mgodo wa Mbanguzi 1973', 16φ, MM c.216. 'Hail, Mbanguzi! What do you see? We see the governor arrive...'



***Mdano, Mdano wahombe, Mchuyo (call, great call, a dance action)***

In Figure 12 below, featured in the film ‘The Chopi Timbila Dance’, the opening chord C, E and A contrasting with D, F and B at the start of the second half is a common way of starting many tunes. The signal as played by Venancio starts at the end of bar 4, bar 3 is played as normal, then the rest of the signal is in bar 4 and 1, followed by the answer.

The figure shows a handwritten musical score for a song. It consists of several staves of music. The first staff is a guitar-like accompaniment with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It starts with a 16-measure rest, then has notes with 'V' above them. A bracket labeled '4' spans the 10th and 11th measures. The second staff continues the accompaniment. The third staff is labeled 'SIGNAL' and shows a short melodic phrase. The fourth staff is labeled 'ANSWER' and shows a longer melodic phrase. The fifth staff is labeled 'SONG V.1.' and contains the lyrics: 'La - va - na - ni mo-tse-nu ma-ja - ha mi-ta - pfa mdan'. The sixth staff continues the lyrics: 'La - va - na - ni mo-tse-nu ma-ja - ha mi-ta - pfa mda-no wa-teu-'. The seventh staff is labeled 'ENDING' and shows the final notes of the piece. The eighth staff shows the final two notes of the ending: '-tea - mba.'.

Figure 12. *Mdano* “Lavanani motsenu” by Venancio, film ‘The Chopi timbila dance’ 1980, 16ϕ, MM c.200. ‘Come all you young men, hear mdano, sweet mdano...’

### ***Chibhudhu* (the sound ‘bhu’ of dancers’ shields striking the ground)**

Figure 13, the second fast dance, it always has a short, intense 8-beat cycle. The lyric is very brief, gasped out just before the end.

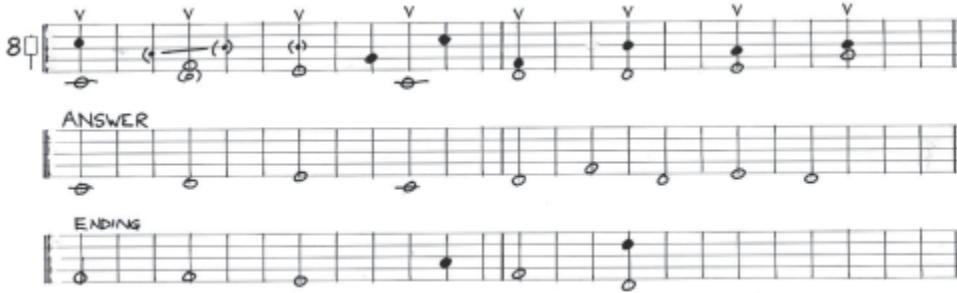


Figure 13. *Chibhudhu* by Venancio, Marievale Mine, 1973, 8♩ MM c.216. [CD track 3]

### ***Mzeno* (the ‘great song’, -zena, to play slowly, in a relaxed manner)**

*Mzeno* is considered the core movement of the *timbila* dance. It has a dramatic intensity, with two changes of tempo that makes it unique. When musicians sit around, they often reminisce about *Mzeno* movements of past years, their music and lyrics. Some *mizeno*, such as “Hinganyengisa” composed by Katini in 1942 and given below, are widely known among Chopi and recalled for many years. The cycle length is normally 16 beats, the tonality often primarily an alternation of the two chords, CEA and DFB (remembering that these are the Chopi notes, not the Western).

*Mzeno* starts at a moderate tempo. After a few minutes the drama starts: a slow-down to around MM 126, which may be gradual or abrupt, following the leader, the audience gather in an ellipse close around the orchestra and dancers, the rattle players put down their rattles and join the line of dancers.<sup>22</sup> The *timbila* players reduce their parts to the simplest and quietest, some players just tap-tapping. When ready, the leader lines out the words of the first verse then, after a *velusa*, everybody present sings, with simple, formalised movements. This only happens in *Mzeno*. The contrast with the other movements, with everybody singing and moving, is striking and moving. Each of five or more verses is sung twice, after a *velusa* each time. Then the dance leader’s whistle is the sign for the leader to bring the tempo back to the initial speed with a *velusa*, the rattle players to pick up, and the audience to return to their places. They play out with a final repeat of the first verse.

Below are some examples of *Mizeno* to give an idea of their shape, first a simple, starter one from Zandamela – so simple that one musician elsewhere said it was not worthy of a *Mzeno*. See again how the on-beats are played now in the L hand, now in the R. No resting on one movement pattern throughout a piece!

<sup>22</sup> See the film “*Mgodo wa Mkandeni*”, A. Tracey/Zantzing 1976.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff is numbered '16' and contains eight measures of music. Above the first four measures are the letters 'V', and above the last four are 'V' and '(+)'. The notes are mostly quarter notes on a five-line staff. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values and includes some notes with a '+' sign. The third staff is labeled 'ANSWER' and shows a response to the previous staff with fewer notes.

Figure 14. *Mzeno* at Zandamela, “Malalani motsenu mabulule...”, 1973, 16ϕ, MM126/144.

In the following *Mzeno* of Venancio’s from when he was at Marievale Mine, Springs, the *Dibhinda* part gives the bones of it, showing clearly in bars 1 and 3 the Chopi use of the same chord change as in the Shona *mbira*. The full *mbila* part shows his florid and powerful style. As choreographer Nadia Nahumck noted of the effect of Chopi dance, “When [the patterns] are performed at the indicated speed, and with rhythmic co-ordination of feet, torso, arms, head, shield and spear, the choreographic conception ... is a rush of movement that is impulsive, terrifying in its outpouring of personal energy, physically aggressive and totally committed to its space.”<sup>23</sup> The description is not far out for Venancio’s or any leading player’s attack on the instrument. Rhythmic space is there to be filled out. What at first I used to take as ‘flams,’ a relaxed non-coordination of certain beats, I now hear as consistently and precisely planned, using half pulses and 3:4 patterns. The signal comes in bar 4, and is answered in the next bar 2.

<sup>23</sup> Nahumck in Tracey/Zantzing 1976.

Figure 15. *Mzeno* by Venancio 1975, 16φ, MM c. 126/144.

Venancio composed the above *Mzeno* after we had been making our 1973 films together, when we had first sampled the *timbila* of seven Chopi districts. We were all impressed with the *Mzeno* by Melekwane at Nyakutowo,<sup>24</sup> and Venancio used its shape for this piece. But he dropped it one note lower and made other changes so, as he hinted, he could not be held to have copied someone else's *Mzeno*.<sup>25</sup> Note in bar 2 a version of the common *timbila* chord movement used in numerous tunes:

Figure 16. Chord movement.

Now, below (Figure 17) is the famous *Mzeno* of Katini at Zavala of the early 1940s.<sup>26</sup> Versions are given from four layers around Chopiland, the first two from Zavala itself, which could probably claim to be the most 'correct', many years after Katini's death. The *mbingwi* part is from Mbilanyane at Mbanguzi, the last known player of this now rare

<sup>24</sup> Slide show with sound by the late Curt Wittig, sound engineer on all our films, Kaleidophone Records, Washington DC.

<sup>25</sup> The practice of shifting key up or down on the equi-tuned *timbila* is not uncommon.

<sup>26</sup> See H. Tracey 1948/1970.

instrument, pitched between *sanje* above and *dibhinda* below.<sup>27</sup> The answer is played in bar 2. I chose V.2 to reproduce here – it happens to be a favourite of mine.

16  $\phi$

SANJE

MBINGWI

DIBHINDA

ANSWER

V.2

Wa-ni Za-va-la wa Ru-mu-si-ya ka-de-ya Ma-nje-nge ba-te wa-nge

Ru-pu-ta ne Sa-la-ni Ru-pu-ta ne Ru-sa-la-ni Za-va-la a-tsu-ka m-

sa ko-ni ne Re-shi-ba u-na-wa-na mi-fu-mbo

Figure 17. *Mzeno* “Hinganyengisa” by Katini, Zavala 1942, 16 $\phi$ , MM c.126/144. ‘Wani Zavala, you left Manjengwe in jail...’

As a last look at the *Mzeno* form, here is Venancio’s composition, ‘Politician *mzeno*’ featured in the film ‘The Chopi timbila dance’. (He used the same tune with his lament for the 1989 death of South African opposition activist David Webster who was well-known to the Chopi due to his doctoral research in Chopiland.) The beginning shows the same formulaic chords as many tunes. The signal starts at the end of bar 1 and is answered in bar 4. The *Dibhinda* part again shows the tune in a more skeletal form. The first verse is sung right through at the beginning. On the final repeat the piece ends on the penultimate line, as shown.

<sup>27</sup> He can be seen in the second row in Tracey/Zantlinger 1976.

16

Y

DIBHINDA

SIGNAL

ANSWER

V.I.

Ma - la - la - ni mo - tse - nu ma - ko - no hi - cha - nga - sika - ka ti -

- mbi' ti - mbi - la ta wu - si - wa - na hi - di - la - ko Mo -

ENDING

ndla - ne wo - da - wa ngu ma - po - tu - ge - zi

ma - po - tu - ge - zi ma - di - nga hi - da - ye - la Mo -

ndla. ne va - chi va - na - hi - hlu - lo

Figure 18. *Mzeno* "Politician" (Webster) by Venancio 1979, film 'The Chopi timbila dance', 1980, 16 $\phi$ , MM c.126/144. [CD track 4] "Hush you all, this year we have composed for timbila, timbila of sadness mourning Mondlane who was killed by the Portuguese, the Portuguese who thought by killing Mondlane they would overcome us..."

**Mabandla (councillors)**

After the slow tempo and the emotion of *Mzeno*, and the *kuhauzela* shouts of the dancers, the last dance movement follows, played at breakneck speed by the *timbila*, giving both dancers and players a chance for soloing. The signal is in bars 4 then 2, answered in 3 and 4.

The musical score is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It begins with a tempo marking of 16♩. The score is divided into several sections:

- First Section:** A sequence of notes with 'V' above each measure, indicating a vocal or instrumental signal.
- SIGNAL:** A section labeled 'SIGNAL' with a double bar line at the end.
- ANSWER:** A section labeled 'ANSWER' with a double bar line at the end.
- Vocal Line:** Lyrics are written below the notes:
 

Vu - sa mba - ngo va - lu - ngu ni va - thu va - m -  
 - ti - ma va - ma - ji vo - sa - fa reu -
- ENDING:** A section labeled 'ENDING' with a double bar line at the end.
- Final Phrase:** A short phrase at the bottom: -Eha - va

Figure 19. *Mabandla* “Vusa mbango” by Venancio, film ‘The Chopi timbila dance’ 1980, 16ϕ MM c.240. “Gird yourselves, whites and black people, the Mazhi have fled” (the Portuguese, who say ‘mazh mazh’).

As another glimpse of Chopi creativity, here (Figure 20) is a fast *Mabandla* tune that was composed by Venancio while he was away from home, and played to me in Maputo with great pleasure while it was fresh in his head. He was unsure whether to use it as a *Mabandla* or to make it a *Mtsitso*, which would entail changing its style to some extent and slowing it down. The irregular structure and the 20-beat cycle are more *Mtsitso*-like, and the unexpected insertion of the RH notes D G in the second line is humorous. He has not used it yet.

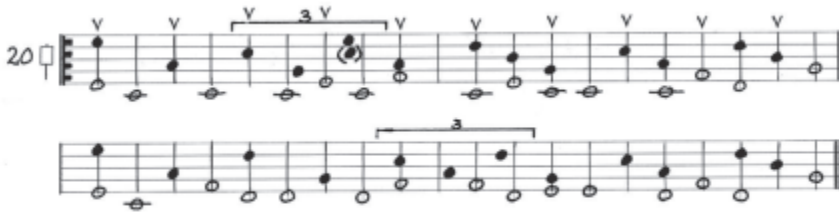


Figure 20. *Mabandla* by Venancio, Polana, 20 $\phi$ .

### *Mtsitso wo gwitisa* (last *mtsitso*)

Usually a repeat of the last opening *Mtsitso*, The last *mtsitso* is played with as much energy as the players still have. The dancers exit during it and the performance is over. “*Zaripeni wangu*” is a well-known old song in his own *timbila* arrangement that Venancio sometimes throws in to please the people.

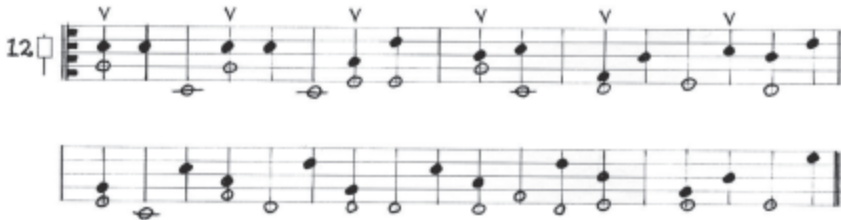


Figure 21. *Mtsitso wogwitisa* “*Zaripeni wangu*” arr. Venancio, 20 $\phi$ , MM c.132. [CD track 5]

The character of each movement of the *timbila* dance, in music, dance and song, is quite distinct to those who know it. It is as if each one had originally been a separate dance, and eventually been combined into a suite. We know from Fernandes (1560) that “Their dance represents all the actions of warfare...”. But this is lost in history. Any military significance it may have had is today at a minimum; it should rather be seen as a display of skill, manhood, pride in identity as Chopi and allegiance as Mozambicans.

What is the purpose of these tiny transcriptions of this big art form? Chopi music is impossible to ignore. It is there, a big and ancient classic music. In its compass,



complexity and the degree of the people's involvement it is a major music of the world, and a challenge that I have tried to rise to since I first heard it as a small boy. I feel responsible towards the master musicians who have entrusted me with their art and skills, particularly Venancio Mbande and the others mentioned here, and towards my father, who first informed the world about *timbila* with his 1948 book, *Chopi Musicians*. The music transcriptions in the first edition, done by two members of the Durban Orchestra, gave little idea of what the *timbila* were really doing. The second edition in 1970 included some of my transcriptions. Those presented here will, I hope, provide readers with a deeper understanding of *timbila* music and continue to offer a reinforcement to Mozambicans and a challenge to marimbists in Africa and abroad.

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