

BOOK REVIEW

Tracing the Mbira Sound Archive in Zimbabwe.

Luis Gimenez Amoros. 2018.

New York: Routledge.

Bibliography, index, discography, filmography, 7 figures, 131pp.

This monograph is based on the author's fieldwork in Zimbabwe, conducted as a post-doctoral fellow at the Unit of Zimbabwean Studies in the Sociology Department at Rhodes University in 2015-16. Presumably, as a recipient of this fellowship, Gimenez Amoros was expected to promote scholarly research and publications on colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe that specifically focus on the contemporary political economy of Zimbabwe. However, the author's project to carry out digital return of the historic mbira recordings conserved at the International Library of African Music (ILAM) made by Hugh and Andrew Tracey over more than four decades from 1929, to universities, mbira players and source communities in Zimbabwe has no discernible focus on the contemporary political economy of Zimbabwe. What Gimenez Amoros does address, although without in-depth research, is pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial conditions and the roles of Shona cosmology, mbira music and chimurenga music in creation of a Shona identity. He goes on to critique both Hugh and Andrew Tracey's work and then the process of digital return of their recordings. Finally, he makes recommendations for curriculum transformation and for ILAM as a "living archive."

The strength of Gimenez Amoros' project lies in his ability to play the mbira. This certainly enhanced the depth of his engagement with the university faculty and students and the twenty-two mbira players to whom he gave copies of the Tracey mbira recordings, and with Edward Bera, the mbira player and mbira maker who assisted him with his fieldwork. It is unfortunate that adequate funding was not available to allow him to return the recordings to more than a few source communities, but his project did assist ILAM in its commitment to returning the historical recordings in its collections into the hands of people in their culture of origin to promote sustainability of the heritage they contain. For the record, digital return of ILAM's recordings was initiated from the time its collections were catalogued and digitised (2008-2009) as an ethical mandate whenever opportunities arose. The first efforts in this regard were to return geographic-specific digital copies of Hugh Tracey's field recordings published in his *Sound of Africa* series to university music departments in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania and to national archives in Zambia and Swaziland.

From Gimenez Amoros' comments on digital return to source communities (Chapter 9), his critique of Hugh and Andrew Tracey's mbira sound archive

(Chapters 1-4) and his recommendations for the archive (Chapter 10), it is evident that he does not understand the ethic of reciprocity ILAM has adopted and advocates, nor does he understand ILAM's commitment to the promotion of music heritage sustainability among Africans in African communities through its projects in outreach, education and digital return of its collections - all of which have been part of ILAM's transformation and de-colonisation efforts since late 2008 when cataloguing and digitisation of its holdings and on-line access to the catalogue from ILAM's website were accomplished. A summary of the contents of the book follows.

In the Introduction, Gimenez Amoros provides a brief historical overview of ILAM's founder, Hugh Tracey and his work, with unfortunate errors such as Tracey's birth year stated as 1904(5) - Hugh Tracey was born 1903 - and his failure to mention the Andrew Tracey Collection of field recordings and films as part of ILAM's holdings (1). Most serious is his failure to acknowledge how he draws on Andrew's research and analysis for his own when he says, "I argue that if this music is not only studied through ethnic and linguistic demarcations but also through musical similarities, then, it is possible to examine the mobility of mbira music in southern Africa"(2). This statement leads the reader to believe that Gimenez Amoros is undertaking work that Andrew Tracey already accomplished with his field research on the geographic spread of mbira music and his publications from that research in the 1970s. Further, he erroneously states that Andrew Tracey established African Musical Instruments (AMI) when he moved ILAM to Rhodes University in 1978 (5). In fact, African Musical Instruments was established by Hugh Tracey in 1954, the same year he established ILAM. Factual errors such as these are inexcusable since the correct information is readily available. They point to hasty assumptions made by Gimenez Amoros, superficial research and a serious lack of attention to accuracy of details. The author completes the Introduction by suggesting various potentials of ILAM's sound archive, giving a summary of ILAM's digital return and revitalisation projects and an outline of the content of the book.

His study of the Tracey mbira sound archive at ILAM is approached in terms of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras and organised into three parts: Part I "Reconsidering the Colonial Archive" (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4); Part II "Reconsidering the Sound Archive and Postcolonial Nationhood" (Chapters 5, 6); Part III "The Digital Return and Revitalisation Project of the Mbira Sound Archive in Zimbabwe" (Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10). However, the three parts do not correspond to the three historical periods sequentially. Attention to the pre-colonial era is in Part II, Chapter 5 where he discusses the politicisation of both the Great Zimbabwe and the spirit of Chaminuka, the concept of patriotic history and how sound recordings of songs about Chaminuka "... question the monolithic historical narrative of Chaminuka and Great Zimbabwe as a form of using the power and the notion of national heritage

by the Zimbabwean president”(68). This leads into a discussion of the emergence of chimurenga music and its promotion as nationalist music in Chapter 6.

Returning to Chapter 1, here the author discusses the colonial creation of Shona musical identity through interventions of Christian missionary and Native Affairs Department operations and how it has been carried forward in the post-colonial era. The author then critiques Hugh Tracey’s use of colonial ethnic and linguistic categories to classify his recordings. Chapter 2 offers further critique of the classification system used by Hugh and Andrew Tracey that categorises lamellophones according to the type of scale they use, for example, hexatonic or heptatonic. He provides images of the different heptatonic mbira types played by the Shona, most of which were built by his research collaborator, Edward Bera, except for a *matepe* built by Chaka Chawasarira (Figure 2.5) and a *nyunganyunga/karimba* (Figure 2.2) built by African Musical Instruments (AMI).

Chapter 3 addresses Andrew Tracey’s seminal research published in his article, “The System of the Mbira” (1989, 2015), in which he identifies lamellophone types that share the same harmonic structure as members of the southern Africa mbira family that descend from a common ancestor, the *kalimba*. Through his research Tracey determined that these mbiras share a harmonic structure he calls the Shona chord cadence and that they are found through a vast area stretching north along the Zambezi River basin from northern South Africa to eastern Zimbabwe, parts of Botswana, Namibia and Angola, southern Zambia, central and southern Mozambique and southern Malawi (2015: 128-29) and thus across colonial borders. Gimenez Amoros describes Andrew Tracey’s identification of the Shona chord cadence and the “Shona chord finder” tool Tracey developed (Figure 3.1) as relating to mbiras in Mashonaland rather than the entire Zambezi basin Tracey identifies as the range of these mbiras. He then suggests that his listening to the Tracey recordings of this spread of mbira music to identify which ones exhibit the Shona chord cadence, using Andrew Tracey’s chord finder as a tool, somehow goes beyond Andrew Tracey’s original analysis through use of the concept of regionalism. Supposedly this corrects Tracey’s designations that use colonial borders and bridges colonial and post-colonial narratives although, perhaps because of the dense, repetitive, unclear presentation, how it does this was not obvious to me. In Chapter 4 he goes on to offer his personal re-interpretations of the lyrics of certain mbira songs that contain social and historical information about mbira musicians that he contends are not categorised appropriately. He then suggests that his re-interpretations of the song lyrics can serve to link pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial narratives. Again, how this is the case is not clear, nor how his re-interpretations of the song lyrics are somehow more valid.

The digital return process itself is discussed in Part III of the book in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 with Chapter 10 offering suggestions for how the sound archive can serve the transformation of curricula in the African academy and become a “living archive.” In this final section of the book the author reports on his interviews with mbira musicians who were recipients of the recordings in Chapter 8 and the return of the recordings to source communities in Chapter 9, after a discussion of intangible versus tangible heritage in Chapter 7 that leads to his recommendation that the mbiras from Zimbabwe in the ILAM instrument collection be repatriated to Midlands State University in Gweru. This recommendation betrays the author’s assumption that ILAM is in a position to repatriate the instruments. In fact, ownership of the instrument collection was retained by the Tracey family and the Tracey family has chosen to keep the collection on permanent display at ILAM. Gimenez Amoros’ comment about the ILAM Instrument Collection Preservation Project as “renewing its exhibition by placing the instruments in new exhibition cages ...” (91) together with his ensuing argument that preserving the instrument collection is ILAM’s focus rather than transformation into a “living archive” by repatriating the instruments is regrettable. Perhaps the word “cages” is supposed to read “cases” since this book has many such typographical errors; for example, equalitarian rather than egalitarian (71), expect rather than except (62), chemichura rather than chemirocha (103) and deritage rather than heritage (125) to mention a few.

This text also suffers from problems with English usage such as singular subject paired with a plural verb, misuse of prepositions such as “in” and “on” and long dense sentences that repeat content already stated or that simply are not clear. In one case the female mbira artist, Benita Tapfiwa’s surname is misspelled as Taphiwa and in another she is referred to with a masculine pronoun; he misspells the surname of Thomas Mapfumo as Maphumo, and I could go on. One wonders if the publisher offered any editorial assistance to the author and why this manuscript was not corrected, if not for errors in content at least for spelling and grammatical errors, before it went to press. Was the manuscript ever peer reviewed or thoroughly proof-read? Mistakes such as the author’s misdating of the year of Andrew Tracey’s films made with Gei Zantzinger in both the text and bibliography as 1999, although he correctly gives the year as 1975 in one instance on page 28 after having cited the year as 1999 on page 27. Surely this should have been noticed easily by the author or publisher if the manuscript were carefully proof-read before being sent to press. It leads one to question the professional standards of the publisher, not to mention those of the author.

The publisher states on the un-paginated page just before the title page of the book, “the main goal of this study is to reconsider the colonial demarcations of

southern African *mbira* music provided by the International Library of African Music (ILAM). These *mbira* recordings reveal that the harmonic system used in different lamellophones (or *mbiras*) in southern Africa is musically related.” That Andrew Tracey’s research and publications on the “mbira family” of southern Africa already reveal this exactly by explicitly stating the harmonic structure of mbira music and demarcating the geographic range of the lamellophones with related harmonic systems is not acknowledged. Furthermore, the author’s general overview of the three historical eras in Zimbabwe up to the present is characterised by analysis based on a review of secondary sources from which he pulls together a superficially informed account of Shona cosmology that does not adequately deal with the role of *mhondoro* spirits and how it relates to the political history of the three Chimurenga struggles. The role of the spirit Chaminuka in the First Chimurenga, the *chimurenga* music genre that grew out of the Second Chimurenga and the politicisation of history in the Mugabe regime’s Third Chimurenga war of land reclamation are all addressed, but unfortunately without the scholarly depth required to fully inform readers or deliver accurate analysis.

Furthermore, it is indeed regrettable that Gimenez Amoros failed to interview Andrew Tracey in regard to his research and the content of this text. In an email response (26 September 2019) to my questions to Andrew Tracey asking if Gimenez Amoros ever interviewed him about his mbira research and his publications from it or about the content of this book, after having read the book, Andrew Tracey said, regarding the critique of his work:

He is very muddled, especially about my work. He does not understand it, what the major aspect of it is, emphasising parts that are well known and hardly mentioning what I consider my main contributions. A lot of this could have been sorted out in a personal conversation. He says we discussed these questions together, which we did not do at any depth. What I remember discussing was where to go in Zimbabwe, whom to see, and talking about what I thought were understudied topics/regions. How can one NOT classify mbiras according to whether they are hexa- or heptatonic? This rather invalidates his criticisms of my work. The chord finder he does not understand at all. He has the wrong end of the stick. It is not a tool in his sense, it merely helps in teaching and demonstrating an understanding of the harmonic system. His quotes from mbira players are not convincing. I don’t see how the book advances the cause or the knowledge of the mbira.

The aim of my mbira research, briefly, is to establish the borders/the spread of the mbira chord sequence region. It is not based on national or ethnic borders but shows plainly that they are irrelevant. If he doesn’t like ILAM’s (Hugh Tracey’s) categorising music by language, what does he suggest to replace it with? He gives

no suggestions. Does he realise that one of the first things a researcher discovers in Africa is that music does indeed follow language borders precisely?

In regard to the book in general:

It is full of inaccuracies and misapprehensions. He continually accuses me/ILAM of mistakes most of which he has not understood, both in themselves and in terms of the periods through which Hugh Tracey and ILAM have lived and the conditions under which the work was done. What did he feel was the commission he was given in repatriating to Zimbabwe? Was it to cast doubt on the whole archive with political criticism with only a whiff of faint praise? What was his purpose for writing a book at all? It is not clear at all. He has rushed into print long before he was ready (e-mail communication 26 September 2019).

In the end this monograph comes off as an exercise to fulfil requirements of the author's post-doctoral fellowship and/or the author's need to deliver a post-colonial critique of the sound archive rather than a careful study based on thorough research of the particulars of Hugh and Andrew Tracey's legacies and ILAM's current work as a living and breathing archive transformed by its efforts to decolonise since it was professionally catalogued and digitised and made accessible online globally and locally in Africa. His study could have addressed how ILAM's ethic of reciprocity is being carried forward by African musicians, musicians from other parts of the world and by scholars, be they African or international like Gimenez Amoros, who are assisting with ILAM's efforts to sustain the music heritage it preserves rather than resurrecting the already over-stated and oft-heard post-colonial critique with no regard for the historical periods in which Hugh and Andrew Tracey did their work.

References

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Diane Thram.

Professor Emerita,
Rhodes University,
South Africa.
