THE MBIRA OF THE NDAU: MOZAMBIQUE AND ZIMBABWE IN 1972

ANDREW TRACEY

Abstract: The article, arising from research done in 1972, follows on the author's series of analyses of the instrumental music of the Shona and Sena peoples of the Zambezi Valley. The analyses in this article focus on the relatively unknown mbira of the Ndau. The article describes its hexatonic note layout, highly variable tunings, and its variations among the Ndau- and Shangana-speaking groups in Southeast Zimbabwe and adjacent regions of Mozambique and South Africa. It includes the historical effect of the Shangana invasion of the nineteenth century into Mozambique. The article further discusses the transcription of the mbira's music, in staff or the author's own tablature, with detailed description of the latter. It compares Ndau with Shona concepts of ownership of songs, the practice of *kubempa* as used by Ndau travelling musicians and the difficulties of working in pre-independence Mozambique. The article presents songs in tablature, some by Bonisa Sithole, the author's field assistant.

Keywords: hexatonic, history, *kubempa*, mbira, *mbira dza vaNdau*, Mozambique, *murombe,* Ndau, Shona, Shangana, transcriptions, tunings, Zimbabwe

Introduction

In the Johannesburg township of Soweto in 1976, violent protests broke out over the issue of whether English or Afrikaans should be the medium of instruction in South African government schools. The tumult of an uprising could also serve as a cover for settling private debts, one episode of which, most regrettably, caused the death of Bonisa Isaac Sithole, a Ndau immigrant from southeast Zimbabwe. Sithole was a mbira player, entertainer, stage magician, factory worker, herbalist—and close friend and colleague of mine in the study of his mbira and language. Sithole was the musician who introduced me to *mbira dzavaNdau*, the Ndau mbira. Together we collected nearly a hundred songs on a fieldtrip to his homeland in 1972. I offer some of the songs here for the first time in a type of tablature, or number notation, which will be no obstacle to anyone keen enough to experience this subtly different mbira music from a now well-known region.[1]

As a self-styled "Zulu" in Soweto for some twenty years, Sithole had had to live dangerously, and in his own quirky, extroverted and humorous manner, he did. He was always caught up in jealousies, affairs, or with the apartheid authorities; issues with the *dompas*,[2] the traffic or immigration police. His South-African born, Dobsonville

[1] Readers who are interested in listening to these tracks must contact Mr Elijah Madiba at e.madiba@ru.ac.za. He will forward a link to these recordings.

[2] During apartheid, black South Africans had to carry a passbook with them at all times. The passbook, referred to as "dompas", as a form of protest, was introduced to control the movement of black South Africans, particularly in the cities.

https://doi.org/10.21504/amj.v12i1.2428

neighbours were never persuaded that he was as "Zulu" as they were, although he spoke the language fluently like many other men from his homeland in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In this region, people had kept up the isiZulu of an older generation. His luck ran out during the uprising; rivals took the chance to burn both him and his partner in his car during the confusion.

Sithole was born in the Ndowoyo tribal land near Njaravaze hill which sits on the Mozambique border south of Chipinge in southeast Zimbabwe. The date was approximately 1930. He played mbira from a young age in competition with his lifelong friend, Mubati, whose playing he respected. As a teenager, he started to find jobs in the towns of Southern Rhodesia—as it was then—gravitating to lengthy stays in *Joni* (Johannesburg), South Africa. He always had a keen interest in herbal medicines.[3]

An early job at a printer's in *Joni* lost him part of his right index finger in a paper shear, but did this deter his mbira playing? Not Sithole! He adapted, and added sleight-of-hand stage magic with the patter of a Ndau *nganga* healer to his repertoire, which earned him extra self-employment. In around 1970, I bought him a *sekorokoro* (jalopy) to travel to gigs around the former Transvaal. We became a duo, with a usable repertoire of *ngano* (Shona story-songs) and other stories with and without mbira. He would tell these stories in often-hilarious chiNdau or isiZulu, while, if the audience needed it, my rapid translations of each phrase into English would take the place of *jepfunde,* the traditional story-time response. Then we would sing the 2-part story songs together. This joint act was performed at schools and parties, and in academic lectures in the 1970s when Ethnomusicology was still unheard of in South African universities.

His death accounts for the late appearance of this article. We had spent four months together in the winter of 1972 learning about *mbira dzavaNdau*,[4] and traversing as much as possible of Ndau-land in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe. When he died we were still going about transcribing song-words and stories from 1972. Now, nearly fifty years later, in 2021, and given the hugely increased national and international interest in all members of the Zambezi Valley mbira family, it is time to make this material available to the general public. I hope it will help to revive an interest in the *mbira dzavaNdau* to combat its present, weakened state (Perman 2019).

The *mbira dzavaNdau* is the almost forgotten child of mbira studies in the Shona-Sena Zambezi valley region. Apart from Hugh Tracey's many recordings from the 1950s[5] and mine from 1972, the only major work I am aware of is by Tony Perman (2019). Perman is a player of the Shona *mbira dzavadzimu,* and recently spent two years

[3] We would often stop when he spotted some ingredient, herbal or animal, to stock his herbalist's *chitundu* (medicine basket). The "ingredients" included snake, whose fat he used to treat joint pain. A favourite, if naughty, remedy of his for straying husbands was *uriri* (from *-rira*, cry), the buffalo bean creeper whose large beans are covered in loose hairs. These hairs irritate or tickle the skin with unbearable strength. They are placed in the lover's bed. Sithole's coffee can of *uriri* was sealed with tape and kept in the car. If it had ever spilled we would have had to abandon the car! This became one of our stories.

[4] Or *mbira javaNdau*, as said in Danda and Shanga, deeper Ndau dialects inside Mozambique.

[5] Ndau mbira recordings in the ILAM Sound of Africa series, TRs 3, 29, 67, 81, 176, 205.

working in Chipinge. This is the focal point of the Ndau who live on the Zimbabwean side of the border. He made a particular study of their spiritual practices. During this time he learned to play *mbira dzavaNdau* from Davison Masiza and pioneered the use of staff notation for notating its music.

It is worth explaining to the modern generation of enthusiasts of the large Shona and Sena spiritual mbiras, such as *mbira dzavadzimu, matepe* and *njari*, that while *mbira dzavaNdau* is organologically related to the large family descending from the *karimba* mbira (Tracey 1972), the structure of its music is very different. It does not have their intricate interplay of long chord sequences. It is typically a *murombe's*, a minstrel's mbira for entertainment and fun, not for bringing possession by *manjozi/ mandlozi* or any of the family of Ndau spirits.[6] There are other occasions and musics for that purpose (Perman 2011). There can even be a certain disdain showed by supporters of the ancient Shona mbira traditions when they remark that the *mbira dzavaNdau* is "merely" hexa-, not heptatonic, its harmony is simple, nearly static, its patterns and cycles are short, it is not played in duet, its tuning is inconstant, it has no centuries-old repertoire, it is played at beer parties, and so on. The observations above inform the dichotomy of the classical and folk in the local world of the mbira.

Nevertheless, the music appeals to everyday Ndau musical sensibilities. To me, its appeal comes from the large variety in song shape, tempo and style, cheekily rhythmic structures in every variant of 2-, 3- and 4-pulse groupings as played by the three fingers usually used, the topical, or built-in, or improvised and humorous words, the dance- and sing-ability, the relative ease in learning, and most of all, from the captious, essentially Ndau character of the individuals who play it and the impromptu party occasions at which they perform. One unbeatable come-back from a Ndau player confronted with the wide success of the Shona mbiras in the world of media and entertainment over the last sixty years was: "All their songs sound the same!" He was not far wrong there, as any beginner in the Shona style knows! Every Ndau mbira song, however, has its own distinct character.

The Ndau and history

The history of the present-day Ndau, though not yet known by this name at the time, started with the intrusion into southern Mozambique of Zulu warriors from Natal (Kwazulu Natal) under Soshangane and his son, Gungunyane, during the expulsion of all potentially rival Zulu clans by Shaka in the early nineteenth century (Peires 1983). After nearly seventy years of warfare, and not without great cost, they overcame and transformed local societies such as the Tonga, Tsonga, Ronga, Zhonga, Rozvi, Tswa, Chopi and more. They recruited the men into their regiments and married the women.

[6] The singular of *varombe* is *murombe*. This is a traditional class of itinerant musicians/beggars, usually but not always playing mbira. They were once widespread among all Shona groups. A person could also take up the way of life temporarily. The concept survived among the Ndau at least until 1972, when this fieldwork was conducted.

The new societies became generally known as Shangana or Shangaan, after their first leader.

The Shangaans recruited many thousands of men from the Sabi River region on their northern flank, from the populations now known as Rozvi or Shona, or Mocaranga to the early Portuguese at Sofala. The majority are said to have died far from home in the course of the Shangaan wars, apparently leaving thousands of homeless spirits wandering to this day in southern Mozambique. Here, it is said, that the "homeless spirits" still possess the diviners, the mediums and the people as far south as Swaziland (Mswati) and Kwazulu Natal, as my own experience attests. The joint Shangaan forces finally succumbed to the Portuguese army at the battle of Magul in 1895. Those who managed to return home to the Sabi region and southeastern parts of Zimbabwe came to be known in time as "Ndau." [7] Among men and in their spirit songs they held onto the isiZulu of the period, while their local womenfolk spoke a lowland and coastal form of Shona. In the twentieth century, the new Ndau-ness of their blended language and culture began to be recognised.

For much of the twentieth century, Ndau and Shangaan/Hlengwe men were once again recruited from their territory on both sides of the international border, this time to work on the gold and coal mines of South Africa. Most young men would walk the long, dangerous journey across the Sabi and Limpopo valleys and Kruger National Park on foot. Many are the hair-raising stories of the journey of Ndau and Hlengwe men, and Nyanja/Cewa from Malawi who had in addition to cross the Zambezi valley. The mbira was often chosen as a companion on the journey, and to pass the long, off-duty hours between shifts. The mines served as a training ground for many young men who first learned to play mbira there. Many mbiras were made on the mines. They were made of *maplanga* (pine planks) and played not inside the traditional large snailshell-clad calabash but in a paraffin tin resonator with bottle-top buzzers. These tins became almost the default resonator for the Ndau mbira sound.

Song ownership among Ndau and Shona

We decided to do a joint fieldtrip among Sithole's people. For me it would fill in a large gap in the survey of the Shona and Shona-related mbiras I was engaged in studying and performing (Tracey *passim*). For Sithole, however, it had a more immediate and tangible advantage. He would learn new mbira songs from the masters, handed him on a plate, so to speak, which he could use as part of his performances in Johannesburg.

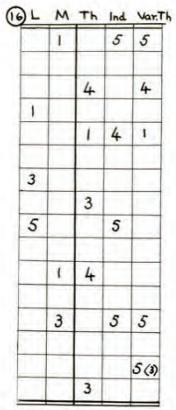
This element raises a difference in the concept of song ownership between Ndau and Shona. First, the language, Ndau, is to all intents and purposes one of the dialects of Shona but is considered by many to be on the fringes of the "proper" language, not unlike the position of Kalanga in west Zimbabwe and northeast Botswana. The

[7] The origin of this term is said by many to have come from their custom of calling out on arrival, "Ndau-we!" (I've come).

deep influence of Zulu and Shangana culture on the Ndau during the turbulence of the nineteenth century means that their culture is not Shona in every respect.

Among the Shona, nearly all the important songs are ancient—some are known to be centuries old—and linked with known, named, chiefly and family spirits, played in ceremonies where ancestors are present and possess a medium, and in a style that the spirits can recognise from when they were alive. Thus, innovation, certainly in a spiritual context, takes second place to faithful rendition of the spirits' favourite styles. Anyone, man or woman, has a right to play the old songs, or to adapt new versions of them. Musical variation as such is not necessarily disapproved of; it keeps today's music alive and creative, providing deep structures such as the traditional chord sequences are always present or hinted at.

In contrast with their Shona neighbours, every *mbira dzavaNdau* player is the master of his own songs. He dreams them, makes them up, develops them, incorporates clever or humorous ideas, and uses them to entertain, that is, to earn a living. He can build a reputation for his best songs. Songs in principle are not inherited or learned from others, instead, they are made up. "Who made this song?", one may ask. The answer always was: "I did." Some old songs such as "Mukadzi warowa", "Nzara chinangonango", "Mphondoro dzinomwa", and "Magayisa", may be well-known among *varombe*. When this is the case, the performer will have his own personalised way of performing it. In its variations, "Machichimana" was a popular mbira song among Ndau and Hlengwe migrant workers in *Joni* in the 1960s. By 1972, we found no one except Mubati who still played it (Transcription 1, written in the kind of tablature suggested in this article).



Transcription 1. "Machichimana" (Mine returnees), by Mubati Muyambo at Garahwa, Zimbabwe.[8]

[8] All transcriptions are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

Kubempa

Kubempa (*kubemha* in Shona) means to beg, specifically in the way a *murombe* (travelling musician-beggar) does it. He often turns up and hangs around when there are events, especially when there is food or drink. He needs to keep his ear to the ground about local happenings. He does not necessarily come up to someone and importune them; he is just there, expecting handouts. In the end he can be paid off to leave the event.

We had to bear the Ndau concept of "copyright" in mind for our fieldwork, so on Sithole's insider advice we played the part of *varombe* ourselves, begging for food. "Copyright" in the context of the Ndau, is not the same as the Western legal concept; it is just my idea of the possessiveness that one notices around Ndau mbira players when it comes to sharing their songs. I call it "copyright" because that is a Western concept that readers will understand, and it does compare closely. The point I am making is that because Ndau mbira players compose their own songs, unlike Shona mbira players who are at liberty to sing any of the old spirit songs as common property, naturally Ndau mbira players feel a sense of ownership over them. That is why Sithole brilliantly suggested that we should approach this proprietary attitude towards song through the typical Ndau practice of *kubempa*. This approach struck home with Ndau musicians and I think accounted for the good reception we had from so many; we all entered into the traditional spirit of the interaction. The "food" we wanted was songs. Two of his songs, "*Nzara inopengisa mambo*" and "*Mukadzi warowa*", were our main vehicles for *kubempa*. Both of us played mbira; Sithole sang lead and I sang answering parts.

Kubempa gave us a socially familiar framework for our presence and what we were doing. It usually smoothed a way through the constraint for which Ndau players had the reputation when it came to sharing, quite understandably in view of their concept of song ownership. We relied on Sithole's understanding of the dynamics, his humour and buffoonery, to win a player's confidence, and my playing back of previous recordings of mbira players from other parts of Ndau-land. On the whole, I can claim, with Sithole's professionalism and my patience, that our turning the tables on *kubempa* was largely successful.

On only one occasion did we utterly fail: a Ndau/Shanga player recommended by the locals remained determinedly in his hut while we resolutely put on what amounted to a "variety show" outside for the women and children in the hope of drawing him out. But other factors could have been at work, we never found out. This was in pre-independence Mozambique, where the Portuguese had long had the bad reputation of turning up randomly at people's homes with two demands: young women for sex and working-age men and boys for *chibalu*, forced labour on the *prazo* sugar plantations along the Zambezi. On arrival at many homes the place would be devoid of women. On spotting a foreign car they disappear. After we had worked hard for an hour or two and the men were beginning to accept our *bona fides* and purely musical intentions, the women would slowly start to reappear.

The mbira dzavaNdau—layout

In Figure 1, the small loop on the front of the rattle plate holds the R little finger. I would class this mbira as on the lines of a "Danda" type 2. The Danda are a subgroup of the Ndau.

The diagram in Figure 2 represents the position of the notes in the hexatonic Ndau tonal system on a mbira of Mubati's from Ndowoyo, south of Chipinge; and, their numbering in the tablature transcriptions. It does not show their tuning, which is discussed below. The thicker horizontal lines show the lowest note and its octaves. Mubati's layout and tuning are identical to Sithole's, below.

Figure 1. *Mbira dzavaNdau* made by Mubati Muyambo, Garahwa, Ndowoyo, Zimbabwe. Source: ILAM.

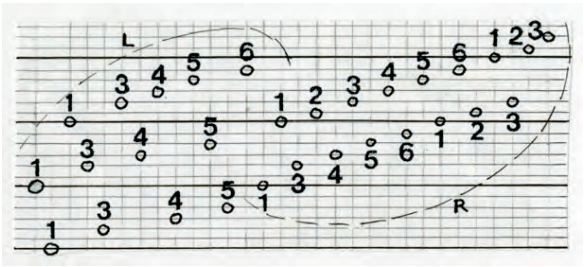


Figure 2. Note layout of Mubati's mbira, Garahwa, Ndowoyo, Zimbabwe. It shows the Ndau hexatonic tonal system as it might appear to the player, not the pitches of the notes. Drawn by the Author.

Note numbering does not refer to pitch, size of intervals or musical function, but simply to the note's position in the hexatonic Ndau scales. Note for instance that Ndau notes, numbers **4**, **5**, **6**, do not sound like a fourth, fifth or sixth to heptatonic ears, but like heptatonic notes, numbers **5**, **6**, **7**.

Ndau mbira layouts have much in common but are hardly ever the same in detail (look at the examples in this article). Nearly all have three ranks (rows, manuals) for the left hand (L), and two for the right hand (R). All ranks are tuned in order of pitch from the low notes on the left, rising up to the high notes on the right, unlike the V-shaped layout of all but one of the other mbiras in the Shona/Sena Zambezi valley mbira region.[9]

L hand notes are tuned so that their octaves are adjacent in a higher or lower rank. There are gaps in the scale of the three L hand ranks, as there are in the low notes of other mbiras in the Shona/Sena family. The two R hand ranks usually share common notes. The R upper rank may be positioned variably above the lower. Up to six outer notes of the low R hand rank are plucked upwards with the index.

[9] The exception is the *mana embudzi* of some of the Sena/Tonga around Shangara in the middle of the Mozambique pedicle, the portion of the country which sticks out between Zimbabwe and Malawi. It has a similar L to R rising scale in two ranks, but is tuned heptatonic (Tracey 1972).

Types of *mbira dza vaNdau*

We came to recognise and give our own appellations to a few roughly defined regional types; not hard-and-fast, but of help in distinguishing differences. These names were not used consistently by players but could come out descriptively in the course of conversation.

Mbira dzechiGova, that is, "valley" mbiras, are from the Sabi valley in Zimbabwe. The older mbiras of this region are generally simpler, with fewer notes, and are substantially the same as the *timbila* mbiras of the two Shangana groups, the Hlengwe in the southeast Zimbabwe lowveld, and the Tsonga in the Kruger National Park region of South Africa. They are neighbours of the Ndau, whose music is also hexatonic. All these groups occasionally share their repertoire.

In the "valley" we found a tendency towards two, not three ranks. This and other factors, including construction, gave me the impression that these instruments were an older stratum of Ndau mbira. "The older the player, the simpler the mbira", was our general finding. Younger musicians were mainly playing "Danda-style" mbiras brought in from Mozambique or by mine-workers from *Joni*.

The Shona influence is strong inside Zimbabwe. Some "valley" mbiras, while keeping the basic Ndau layout, are tuned heptatonic or have a few extra notes added in to allow them to play standard Shona *karimba* songs such as "Chemutengure viri rengoro" as well as the more Ndau-style song such as "Mphondoro dzinomwa" or the game-song, "Dodododo sengere umutinyi?"

Mozambican Ndaus may refer to any mbira played by Zimbabwean Ndaus as *mbira dzadera* (from *dera*: up) or *mbira jaTomboji* (pronounced *Tombodzi* in Zimbabwe) from various epithets given to the "hill-dwelling" Ndau who live on the mountainous border or beyond.

The Ndau/Danda are the predominant group of people in the middle of the Mozambique side of Ndau-land. The *Mbira dzechiDanda* (Danda) has a greater number of keys, always three ranks, a recognisable Danda note layout and sound to its tuning, and often a typical small interval of near 100 Cents between **1'** and **2'** in the R lower rank and octaves. The more "with-it" players were using this type, which was popular among younger and middle-aged players and those who had travelled to work in South Africa. For players in Zimbabwe, to play *mbira dzechiDanda* represented the prestige and novelty of drawing on the presumed deeper Ndau-ness of the Danda who are "somewhere across the border in Mozambique", and personally unknown to most Ndau in Zimbabwe.

Mbira dzechUtee, known as the Utee or Teve, is used towards the northern side of Ndau-land in Mozambique. The obvious feature of *mbira dzechUtee* is the extra 4-note low rank added on the R side, duplicating the four lowest notes on the L. Keys may have a soft, pliable touch, mbira bodies are small, notes are arranged very close together and have a neat, "squared-off" look.

Timbila ta maHlengwe, known as the Hlengwe, is known to many as Shangana or Shangaan. It exists immediately to the south and west of the Ndau in the southeast

corner of Zimbabwe on the far side of the Sabi River. Their *timbila*[10] is fundamentally the same hexatonic instrument as the Ndau *mbira dzechiGova*. Repertoire was commonly shared between Ndau and Hlengwe, especially regarding problems of travel to *Joni* and life on the mines. Only the name of the song and words changed according to the language. Our research did not include *timbila*.

Another "type" which is not a type at all, but caused us much amusement, was our observation that anyone in Mozambique playing Ndau mbira with keys missing or bent and badly out-of-shape was likely to be of the *shoko* (monkey) clan. We called these mbiras *meno embeva* (rat's teeth!). Whenever we came across one, we would ask what the player's clan was. If the answer was "*shoko*", it was the cause of much laughter! Nevertheless, it was sometimes surprising what good music a *meno embeva* with many keys missing could still make.

Oddly enough, this variability reflects a strength of *mbira dzavaNdau* in that it has many keys to start with, so the loss of a few is not always a disaster. Another significant factor is that there are two or three different playing areas of the keyboard used for different songs, and even a *meno embeva* would usually have at least one area intact. All of the "rat's teeth" we found were in Mozambique, a sign of the general poverty of the country in 1972 just before independence in 1975, and particularly in Ndau-land which formed a large part of the home territory of the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana's (RENAMO or the Mozambican National Resistance).

Tunings

All Ndau mbiras are tuned hexatonic. This is easy to say and grasp, but the cause of levels of misunderstanding among all interested parties such as Ndau, Shona and Western musicians, not to mention ethnomusicologists. The trouble arises because the hexatonic Ndau tuning is not merely a matter of omitting one of the conceptual Shona heptatonic notes, the 4th above the lowest, as does the *karimba/kalimba* (the common Shona mbira found all over the Zambezi region). It is because not all the six variable Ndau sounds are perceived equally by the Shona or Western ear. This is especially true of note number **3**, and to a lesser extent note numbers **2** and **6**. Moreover, all comparisons are aggravated by the divergence between different players' tunings (See Figures 4 and 6 below which compare the tuning of five Ndau mbiras).

The note most variably perceived by the above interested parties is number **3**, which probably all Ndau players use at times to serve as Shona or the Western note number 3. But for urban-style players it is also able to double, in their ears, to serve as heptatonic note number 4, the note which is so essential for the subdominant or IV chord in the I-IV-V chord cycles used world-wide. The ambiguous tuning of this note and others can lead to interesting new mbira sounds and modes. It is part of the appeal of *mbira dzaVandau* music for heptatonically-raised listeners, while forcing them to

[10] This is not the same instrument as the renowned *timbila* xylophone of their neighbours, the Chopi.

"wince their ears" to accept it.[11] See the tunings of note number **3** in Figures 3 and 5 below: mostly sharp of the standard tempered major third (400 Cents, which already sounds sharp to the Western violinist's ear) and even sharper than the "natural" third of ratio 5:4 (386 Cents).

The measurements shown in these two Figures are those of the upper R hand rank in each case, the easiest part of the layout to compare, as it usually has a straight run of the scale from **1** to **1'** without gaps. Not all unisons between technically equivalent pitches on the L and R sides of the keyboard are necessarily at the same, precise pitch, nor all octaves exactly in tune, in contrast to the usual tuning practice in all other members of the larger Zambezi mbira family. One could obtain an excess of information by comparing all the variant tunings of every note on every Ndau mbira; all one would learn is that Ndau players are highly tolerant[12] of a range of pitch divergence and that individuality has an important place in the Ndau mbira world. These divergences result in various tunings as seen in Figure 3.

Mubati			Masilandi			Gonorenda			Murimba			Mabalani		
N°	Hz	Cn Tot	N°	Hz	Cn Tot	N°	Hz	Cn Tot	N°	Hz	Cn Tot	N°	Hz	Cn Tot
1'	1072	1217	1'	896	1200	1'	876	1224	1'	808	1200	1'	1008	1200
		163						265			162			173
6	976	1054			322	6	752	959	6	736	1038	6	912	1027
		117						94			157			94
5	912	937	5	744	878	5	712	865	5	672	881	5	864	933
		353			197			228			196			222
4	744	584	4	664	681	4	624	637	4	600	685	4	760	711
		197			270			213			248			255
3	664	387	3	568	411	3	552	424	3	520	437	3	656	456
		246			263			330			289			225
2	576	141	2	488	148	2	456	94	2	440	148	2	576	231
		141			148			94			148			231
1	531	0	1	448	0	1	432	0	1	404	0	1	504	0

Fig.3. Comparative tunings and intervals of five Ndau mbiras
N° column - the note number on the mbira, upper R hand rank
Hz column - the pitch in Herz
Cn column - the Cents interval between each note
Tot column -the total Cents interval above Note 1

Figure 3. Comparative tunings (in Herz/vibrations per second) and intervals (in Cents) of five Ndau mbiras.

The small intervals in Ndau mbira tuning

The small intervals in several positions in Ndau mbira scales (notably between Notes **1** and **2**), such as between the notes of the first five syllables of "Namhla kuno moya" (Transcription 10 below): *Wo-ye wo-ye yo*, intrigue me, because such small intervals are not otherwise found in the Shona/Sena music family of the Zambezi valley. I suggest that this interval has a direct link with the nineteenth century history of the Ndau, already mentioned. The only other consistent use of similar intervals known to me in greater southern Africa are those in Zulu and Swati spiritual, regimental and *ugubhu*

[11] If a calypsonian can "frown his face" when worried, so can a musician with or without perfect pitch "wince his ears" to accept an out-of-tune note as the one he already knows inside his mind. "Wince their ears", is a descriptive phrase which I think very well describes how it feels to respond to out-of-tune music. The fact that "wince" refers to the eyes, not the ears, makes it more poignant.

[12] *Cf* Kubik on tuning tolerance in mbiras of southern Angola (Kubik 1980).

bow songs. Unlike all other southern African bows, the Zulu *ugubhu* uses a near-semitone between its two fingered fundamentals.[13]

Transcribing Ndau pitches

The problem is now to represent pitch in transcribing Ndau notes. Not all fall close enough to Western staff pitch safely to use the Western note names and their conventional places on a 5-line stave. There is no obvious way to make six, irregularly-spaced Ndau notes fit on a 5-line stave, apart from forcing them into a set of names such as C-D-E-G-A-B, G-A-B-D-E-F, or F-G-A-C-D-E, or redesigning the built-in intervals inherent in the 5-line stave itself, which is a sure way to confusion. Standard or partial accidentals or descriptions with each note have been tried by writers for many African musics for almost a century but they are a compromise based on subjective aural guesswork, and need to be re-guessed for every player's or culture's unique sound.

The problem thickens. One has to recognise the human ear's rapid and instinctive tendency to accept and familiarise itself with almost any non-familiar pitch or interval by re-interpreting it as *the nearest familiar sound* in one's native system; in time, the ear can then re-train itself to accept it as normal. All the human senses perceive first what they know; the same applies to language. To conceive of Ndau sounds in terms of foreign note-names or to write them on a stave calibrated to staff values does not lead to a better perception of the Ndau system. What would? Well, for a start, let us avoid other music systems and use only the hard evidence that a mbira gives us: an instrument which can hold a precise tuning, a fixed series of finger actions for each song, and the pulse-based rhythmic system shared by most music cultures in southern Africa. There is no need for more to produce an accurate picture of music on the page, and if we want to reproduce the sounds, the presence of a suitable mbira. [14]

Is there a Ndau tuning system? If there is, I hope this article will contribute some ideas as to how its principles can be understood and described. It would be hard to pin down. In spite of the apparent success of many transcribers in writing African musics in staff notation, I moved away from the attempt to force this hexatonic scale into a Procrustean box. A final nail was the high variability of the players' tunings, unlike traditions where the concepts of fixed tunings and perfect pitch exist, in, say the Chopi

[13] Listen, for example, to Magogo's bow songs on ILAM's Music of Africa series, (MOA37), and The Nguni sound (South Africa and Swaziland 1955, 1957, 1958), on Historical Recordings by Hugh Tracey (SWP20).

[14] A welcome alternative for instant reproduction of the sound is the website, *sympathetic-resonances.org*, created and hosted by Stefan Franke in Berlin, Germany. The software plays back transcriptions of any mbira piece entered into it, using accurately-tuned sounds recorded from real mbiras, with computer animation to show the key strokes as they sound, both on its own number notation and on a reproduction of the face of the mbira. The transcriptions in this article will be appearing on Franke's site. The Sympathetic Resonances project contributes, with its remote learning infrastructure, towards preserving the diversity of many types of mbira, at present those of the Zambezi region of southern Africa. For an example try listening to "*Chifembera*", a Ndau piece: https://sympathetic-resonances.org/view_piece/1091.

timbila xylophone (Mozambique), the Shona mbira family (Zambezi valley), the Ganda court instruments (Uganda) and others in Africa.

Tony Perman (2019) has pioneered the transcription of *mbira dzavaNdau* in staff notation, omitting accidentals for clarity, and providing a Herz figure for the "starting pitch" and Cents figures for all the intervals of three Ndau mbiras.

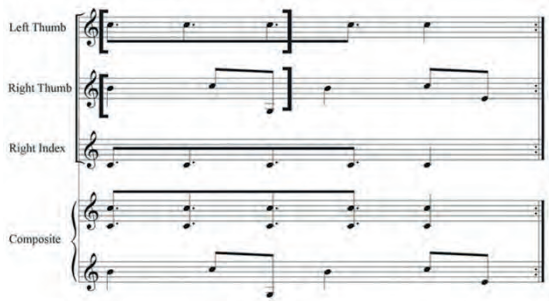


Figure 4. "Mukadzi waroya ndimhondoro" (Woman who witches is a lion), by Zombiyi Muzite (Perman 2019:155).

This transcription will provide exact pitches for anyone keen to reproduce the sounds by whatever means—with the aid of computer technology, electronic tuners which read in Cents, tuning forks, or guesswork—the last being all you could claim if you attempted to tune while looking at Figure 5, a purely visual impression of how far the notes can lie from the Western equi-tempered scale. This chart gives an idea of how difficult it would be to justify the invention of a typical, or even an average, Ndau mbira scale. Masilandi has no Note 6 in his R upper rank. Perhaps the most all-purpose scale would be Murimba's; he tuned up at length before playing, finishing up by adding proudly, with a grin, "Square!" The accuracy of his unisons and octaves would go towards supporting his claim (figures available on request).

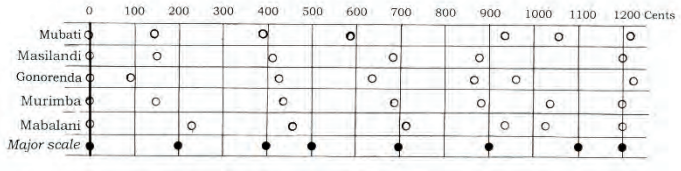


Figure 5. Visual impression in Cents of five Ndau scales compared with tempered Major scale. 1 tempered semitone =100 Cents, 1 octave =1200 Cents. See the Cents numbers in Figure 4 for the exact positions of the notes.

Now what do we have left as a transcription method? Obviously a tablature. This ignores, or sidesteps, the prickly problem of pitch by telling the player not what sounds

to make, but *what to do* in order to make those sounds, that is, what keys to play on the mbira and when. It uses the six note numbers of the Ndau tonal system as they are shown in the mbira layouts, however idiosyncratically they may be tuned by individuals.

There are several models to draw on. I choose a vertical chart, reading from top to bottom, with as many columns as needed, often four. The columns on the Left of the heavier centre line relate to the three ranks of the Left thumb notes, identified at the top by the letters **L** (low), **M** (middle) and **H** (high). In many pieces, not all three are used. The columns on the Right of the line relate to the two ranks of the Right hand notes, identified at the top by the letters, **Th—**to be played by the thumb on the upper rank, or when the note number is underlined, on the lower rank. Other column markings can be: **L** (low rank), **H** (high rank), **Ind** (index finger), **V** (voice) and **Var** (variation). The Right index always plays the lower rank, plucking upwards from underneath, in all but rare cases. More columns can be added on the left or right to show variations. If on the left they are for the Left hand; if on the right for the Right hand.

Notes in brackets are optional variations that do not really need an entire column devoted to them. If they are joined by a line, play them consecutively as a sequence. If two bracketed notes occurring on the same pulse are joined with an arrow, do not try to play both! Play one or the other. If there are 3 notes in the same box, the larger note is the basic note, the others are variations.

Where any mbira rank has notes of the same number at both ends, the lower notes are unmarked. Where necessary, the upper notes are marked with an inverted comma (for example, **1'**).

The fast, equally spaced, non-stressed pulse system as shared by most musics of southern Africa is represented by the horizontal "pulse lines." I have written the pulses of other southern African musics on the pulse lines; for these Ndau mbira transcriptions I choose to write them *between* the lines, that is, in the "boxes." Most notes are played exactly on a certain pulse; if a certain note is to be played between two pulses—rare, but usually exactly halfway between—it is written on the dividing line between two boxes.

The length of the repeating song cycle measured in pulses is shown in a circle at the start of each song. For the sake of writing on paper the start and end of the cycle are marked by a staff-type double bar line. For playing, start where you like! Use the double lines to identify where you are in partial sections of a song or where there are transcribed variations.

The two dots next to double bar lines are borrowed from staff notation, meaning "repeat"; they clarify the length of the repeating cycle. Similarly, in a variation, a diagonal line with a dot each side of it is a symbol meaning, "carry on playing the equivalent part of the basic cycle."

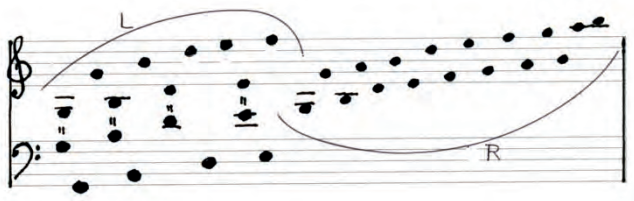
If you try playing these songs you will develop a feel for the alternation of two chords, which Perman *(pace)*, writing from the point of view of the richly harmonic Shona mbira style, can be excused for taking as "harmonic stasis." Two bi-chords, approximately a minor third (c. 300 cents) apart, that is, notes **1 + 4** and **5 + 3**, alternate to form the shape of many mbira pieces. That these two chords sound a third apart is

not apparent from the note numbers alone, but it is obvious to the ear. They are heard mostly in the R thumb and index, whether they play together or after each other. The more formulaic L hand gives occasional harmonic support, but almost by chance; I see its function more as giving metric shape and contrast to the cycle.

In Shona terms, the sound of these two chords amounts to a tonic chord (Notes 1 and 5), and one a third lower (Notes 6 and 3), similar to what is described in Western terms as a relative minor chord. This relationship of two chords a *minor third* apart in both traditions is significant. It can be no accident that if the shape of the ancient Shona "short" or "*karimba*" sequence (Tracey 1961) is reduced to a skeleton—as heard in *ngano* story songs and much modern Shona popular and church music—the steps between these two chords a third apart remain as the bones. This fact unites Ndau with Shona music and the whole of the Zambezi music region. It contrasts markedly with the essentially bow-based Nguni, Sotho and Khoisan music of South Africa whose typical music also moves between two chords, but in a near *whole tone* step. Even after the intensive Ngunifying of Ndau culture and the great loss of men in the Shangaan wars of the nineteenth century, their mbira music, or what may be left of it today, still shows that they remain members of the Zambezi valley music family.

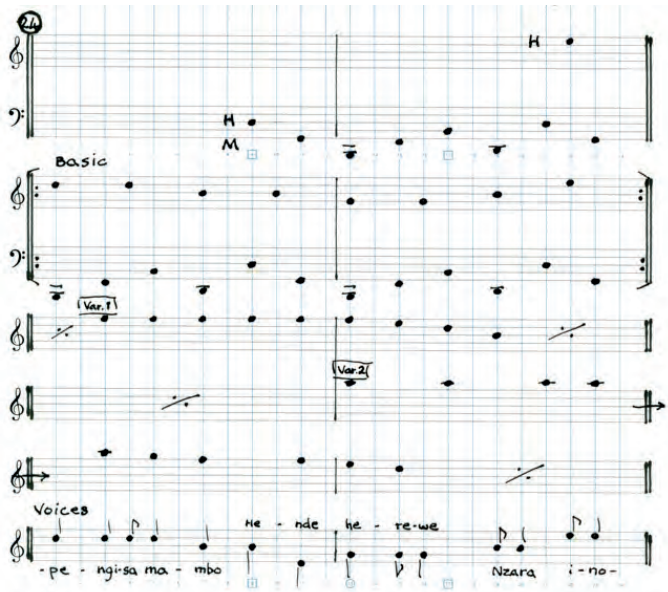
Sithole's songs

First, four of his songs which we used to *bempa* for music from some 24 musicians in 1972, are written in two styles: staff and tablature. Sithole used the first two songs when he was acting in the role of *murombe*. They refer directly to what he would beg for, either food, money or drink.

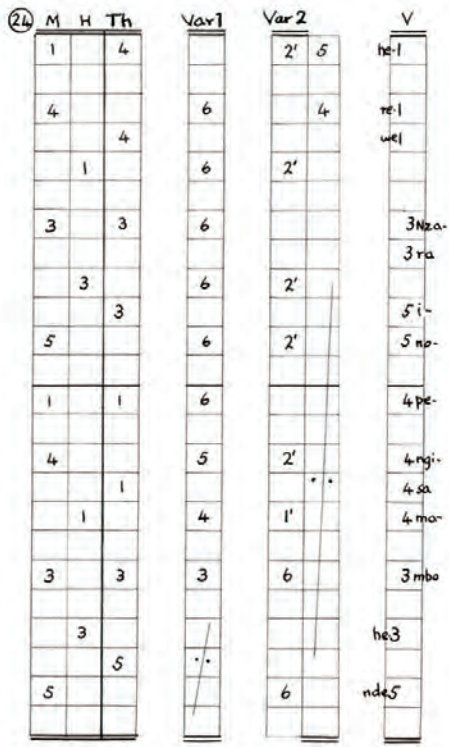


Transcription 2. Sithole's layout in staff. The four notes of the L Middle rank are written in both their possible staff positions.

"Nzara…" is an example of the style where the Left hand plays a fixed part while the Right hand plays variations against it. The top two staves have a way of entering easily into the song. Var.1 takes one line, Var.2, two lines. In both cases, play the basic cycle at least once before repeating either of the variations. The voice parts are for a woman *(Nzara…)* and a man agreeing with her *(He-nde…)*. The message is clear: chiefs get hungry, and I am hungry too!

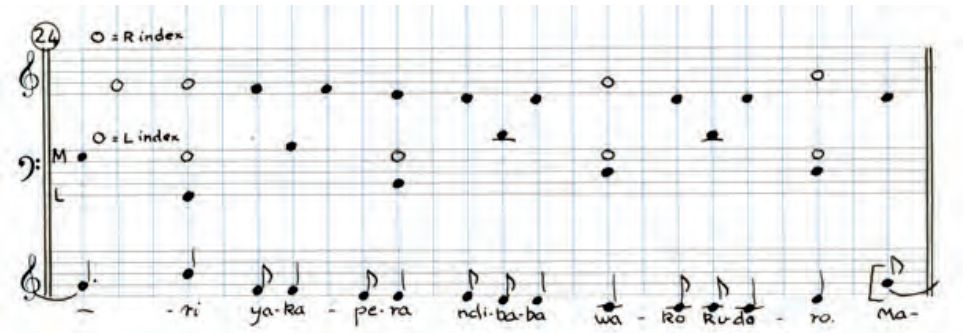


Transcription 3. "Nzara inopengisa mambo" (Hunger makes [even] a chief mad).

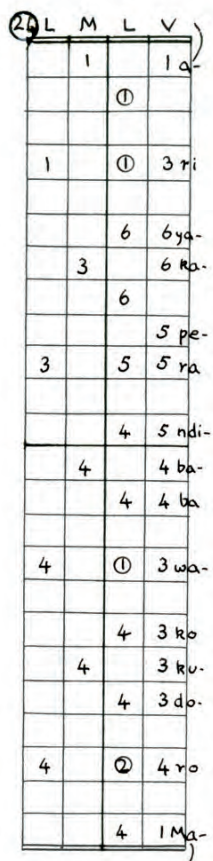


Transcription 4. "Nzara inopengisa mambo" (Hunger makes [even] a chief mad).

"Mari yakapera…" is a town song on mbira where the sharpish Note 3 doubles as heptatonic Note 4.

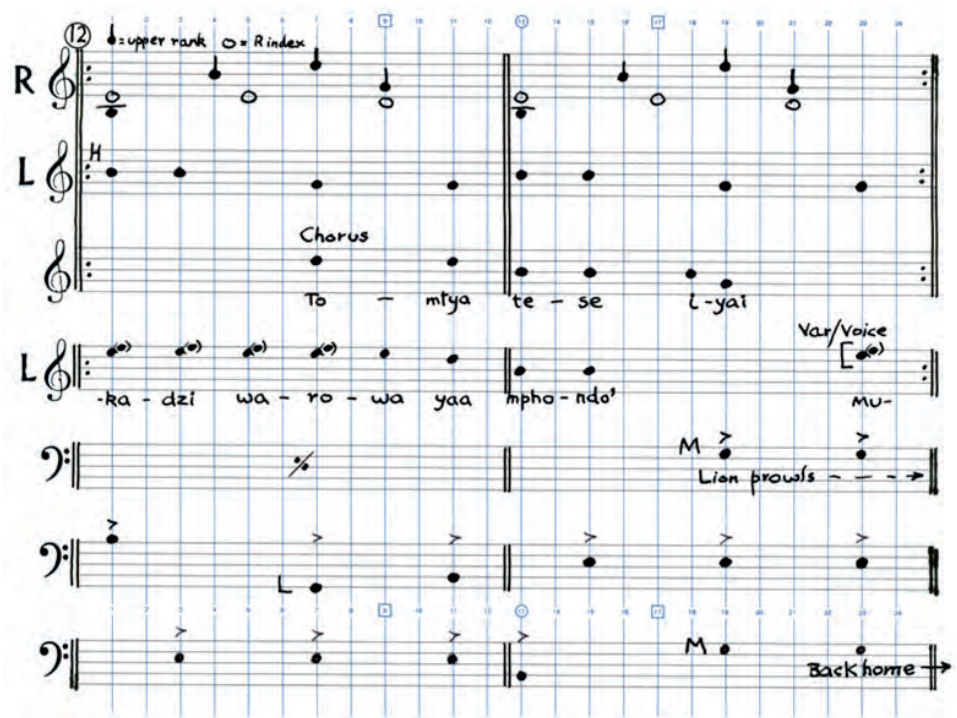


Transcription 5. "Mari yakapera ndibaba wako kudoro" (Money has been finished by your father on beer).

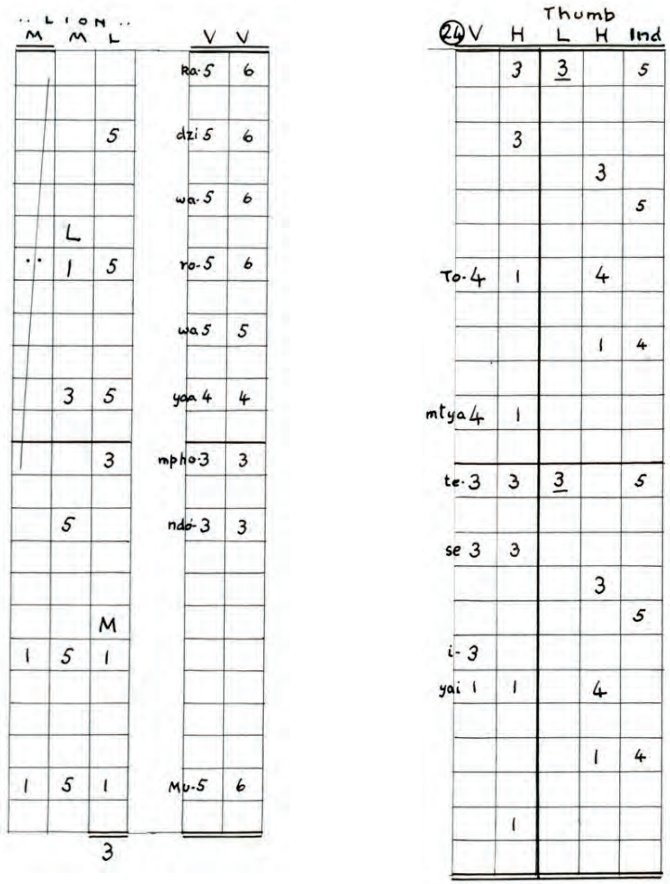


Transcription 6. "Mari yakapera ndibaba wako kudoro" (Money has been finished by your father on beer). Play circles with index finger.

Sithole's third *bempa* song, "Mukadzi warowa yaa mphondoro" (A woman who bewitches becomes a lion), was a favourite performance piece because he loved acting out the excitement of the lion-witch on the loose at night, prowling around on the low notes with loud exclamations. A girlfriend usually sat next to him, taking a frightened woman's part: "*Tomtya tese iyai*" (We all fear her). If no girlfriend around I had to take this part. The presence of lions, not to speak of witches, was very real in Mozambique Ndau-land, as I learned when walking in the bush near the coast. I spotted a blanket near the path and was about to pick it up when our musician guide was quick to bar me, explaining that a lion had eaten a bewitched woman right there not long before. The well-known song is a comment on women in general as they bear the brunt of most accusations of witchcraft. Here it is the R hand that plays the fixed part while the L hand has three variants.



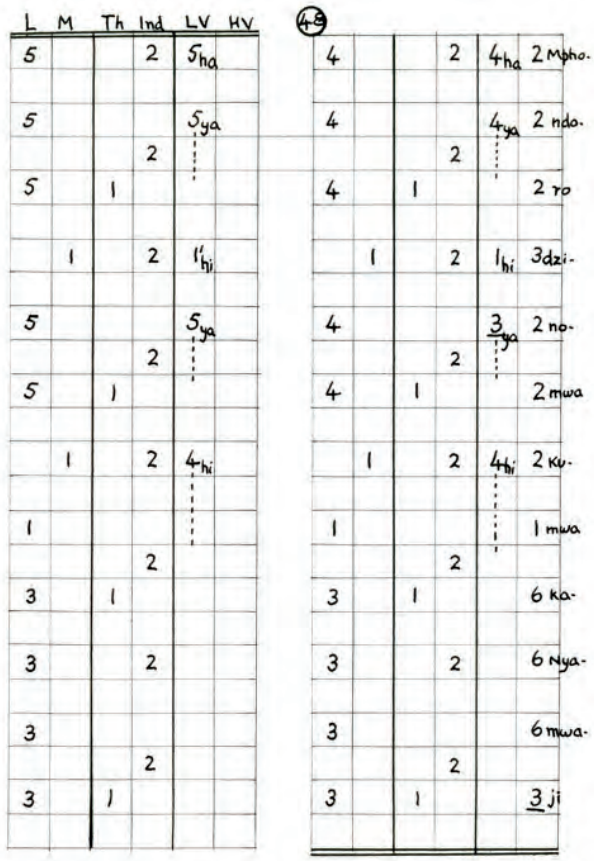
Transcription 7. "Mukadzi warowa yaa mphondoro" (Woman who bewitches becomes lion).



Transcription 8. "Mukadzi warowa yaa mphondoro" (Woman who bewitches becomes lion).

"Mphondoro dzinomwa kaNyamaji" (Lions drink in the Nyamaji [Nyamadzi] River), in Transcription 9 is an example of a Ndau version of a well-known Shona song, "Mhondoro dzinonwa munaZambezi/Save." The L hand part follows the *karimba*-type harmonic sequence of the Shona song, but the R hand part ignores it entirely for the sake of its rhythmic contrast. This arrangement agrees with Perman's finding of the relative importance of rhythm over harmony in Ndau music.

Sithole had many more songs in his head and adapted and composed skilfully. One potential song never saw light; this was while camping in our caravan at Chipise hot springs near the Sabi River in Zimbabwe. We needed to get to a place near Chikore, a high point of the Ndowoyo tribal land on the hills above us where we had heard that a certain Joao Mhlanga Gwenzi played a song called "Kudara vaigara mapako" (long ago they lived in caves). This title was too good to miss as it hinted at historical discoveries. Looking at the map we discovered that he was close to us. The road, however, had a name, *Gadaufe* (you ride, you die). Embarking on the road we soon found why: it was

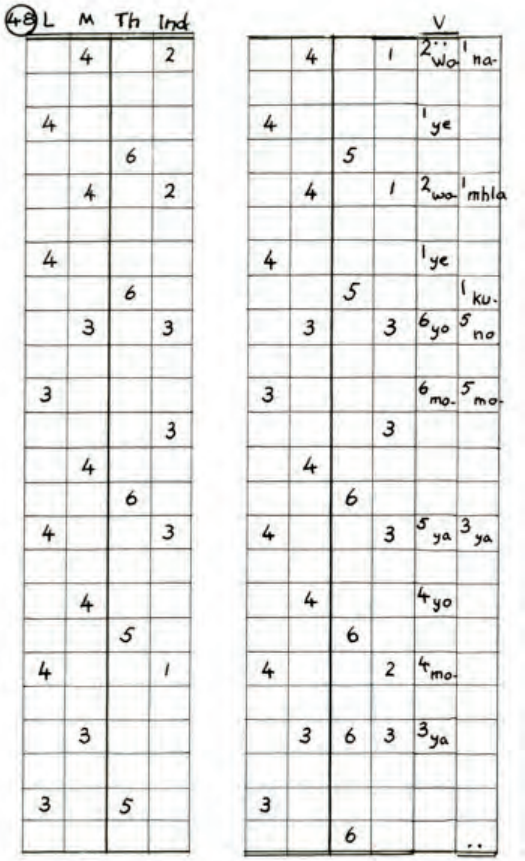


Transcription 9. "Mphondoro dzinomwa kumwa kaNyamaji" (Lions drink in the Nyamaji River).

very steep and made entirely of large rocks. Nevertheless we blundered on and after two damaging and dangerous hours my Chevrolet station wagon finally reached the top. We found Gwenzi and recorded four of his songs. Then, unwilling to risk *Gadaufe* again, we returned to Chipise via Chipinge and the main roads, a detour many miles longer, arriving to my wife Heather's relief after midnight. Sithole said he would make a song about *Gadaufe,* but he was too busy with the wealth of material we were discovering. He was on his top form as *murombe*, learner/teacher, guide and human "passport" inside the Ndau world; little did we suspect that the state of the Ndau mbira would be so impoverished in fifty years' time (Perman 2019).

"Namhla kuno moya" in Transcription 10 was a favourite song of Sithole's, a *madzviti* spirit dance song usually accompanied by *gandira* frame drums and sung in Zulu—part of the heritage of the massive Ndau involvement in the Zulu/Shangana warfare of the nineteenth century. In the coastal Ndau/Shanga region, where isiZulu has by now ceased to be an everyday man's language option, Sithole was much amused to

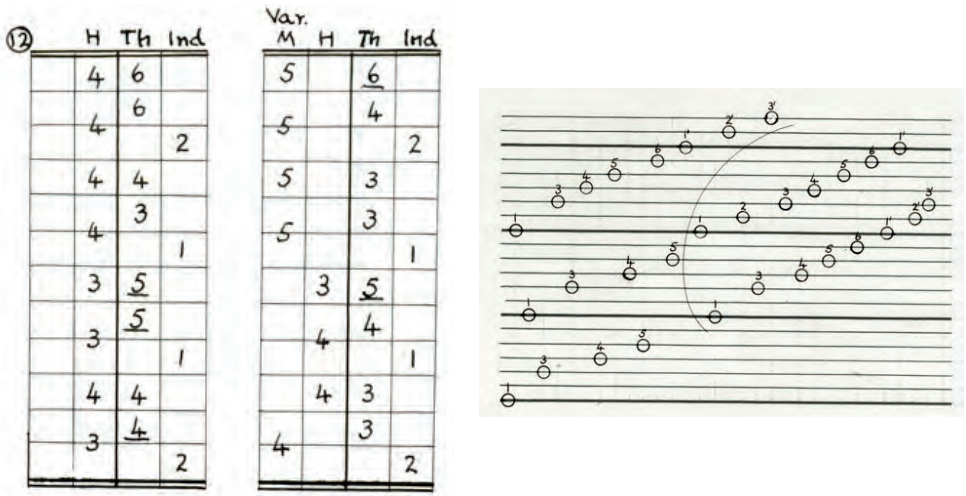
hear people distort the original title of the song and singing, in faulty isiZulu: "*Samsa kuno moya*." Thereafter, he always sang it that way for fun.



Transcription 10. "Namhla kunomoya" (Today there is a wind), for *madzviti* spirits, as played by Zachariah Mugaduwi at Chibavava, Mozambique. Variation: omit all the L low rank notes. V2O.6[15]

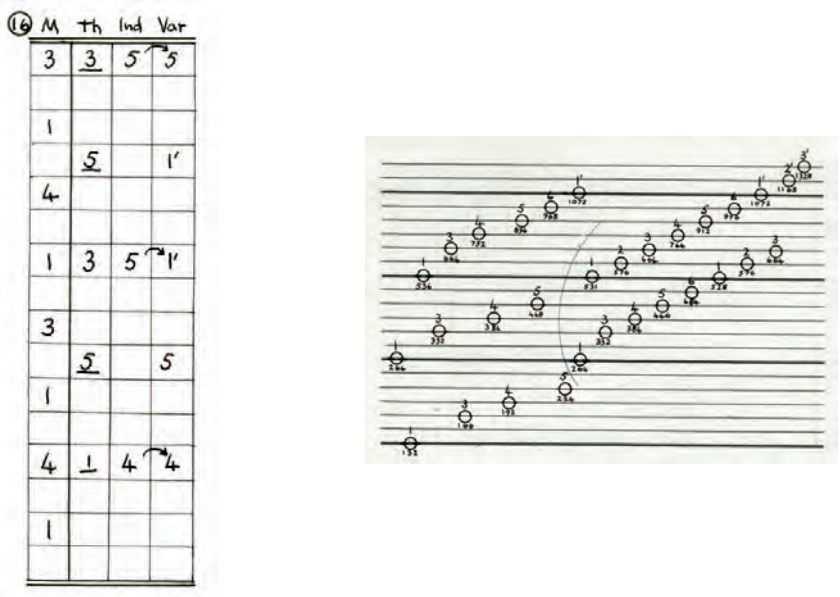
The Ndau/Shanga (not to be confused with the Shangana) live along the Mozambique coast in tall, circular, double-walled huts. The large inside circle is the living space and the outer ring is for sleeping and storage. There is an Arab-influenced "feel" to their culture and appearance that differs from the physically smaller inland Ndau; they are also an exception to the general observation that southern African peoples did not play both mbira and xylophone. The Shanga make their own mbira and buy the latter *(muhambi)* from the Shangana/Tswa, their southern neighbours.

[15] Field recording numbers.

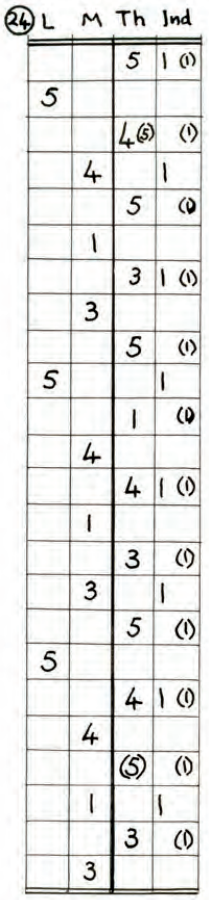


Transcription 11. "Chibonore" (Mealies), song for the Ndau/Shanga *mandowa* dance, by Zacharia Mugaduwi at Chibavava, Mozambique. V2O.2

In 1972, Ndau youths played *gorwe* gourd flutes in pairs, made of clay or *matamba*, wild orange shells pierced with a blow-hole and one or two finger-holes. They are sized about a whole tone apart and play rhythmically contrasting parts, an appealing sound for mbira players to copy. Note the two upper rank notes played with index.



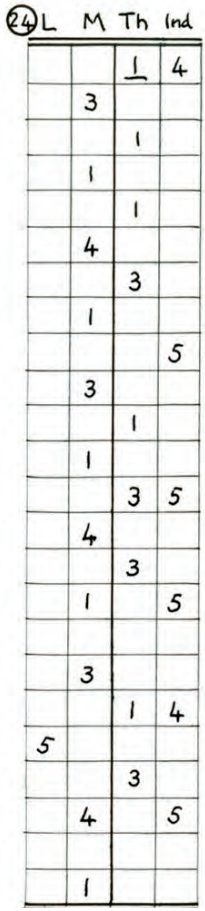
Transcription 12. "Gorwe" by Mubati Muyambo, at Garahwa, Zimbabwe. The sound of two *gorwe* gourd flutes-1.



Transcription 13. "Gwerure" by Mchekawaora, at Shora store, Rotanda, Mozambique. The sound of two *gorwe* gourd flutes-2.

Antonio Chibuyo Mashava Gande, a Ndau/Shanga from Nyanguvo sea island, was a well-known mbira singer on Mozambique radio from the early 1960s onward. "Khombo chinyoka pansi" was his top song, recorded in the former Beira (Maputo) in 1962. Before starting to search for this famous artist, Sithole and I were interviewed at the radio station in Beira, in chiNdau, and I let slip that we were about to look him up. This turned out to be a mistake. It took us a day on foot to find Nyanguvo, not without a struggle, walking among the sea islands up to our necks in places, only to find him gone. He had heard the broadcast, decided not to submit to the all-too-common indignities expected of a white visitor and made himself scarce. His wife welcomed us, however, after we went through our by now well-practised *bona fides* routine. She fed us a gourmet meal of coconut shrimps in wild rice and we had a night's rest. Early in the morning, she arranged a very wet but much easier means of transport onward, an outboard-powered dugout canoe, to the deeper waters of Chihwane island. There,

thankfully, was Gande seeking temporary asylum with the chief; we had a very warm session with him, and learned seven of his songs, including his 1962 hit:



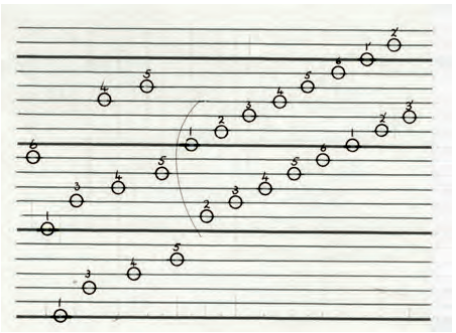
Transcription 14. "Khombo chinyoka pansi" (Bad luck, little snake on the ground), by Antonio Gande at Chihwane island, Mozambique. V2W.7

His musical reputation had caused us to expect a smarter mbira than the one we saw; *cf* the several notes apparently missing from its layout—not quite another *meno embeva.*

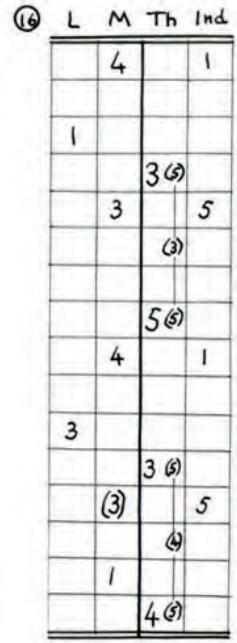
The name Guwela Mashava Landani (London) was known and recommended to us in the Danda region long before we met him at Nyambowa, near Machaze, Mozambique. He was one of the most creative and prolific composer/players of our tour. He had followed a standard young man's life of working on the *Joni* mines, eventually returning loaded with acquisitions as a *magayisa,*[16] and settling as a peasant farmer and

[16] This is the name for a successful returnee from the *de facto* "initiation" of several years hard labour on the *Joni* mines.

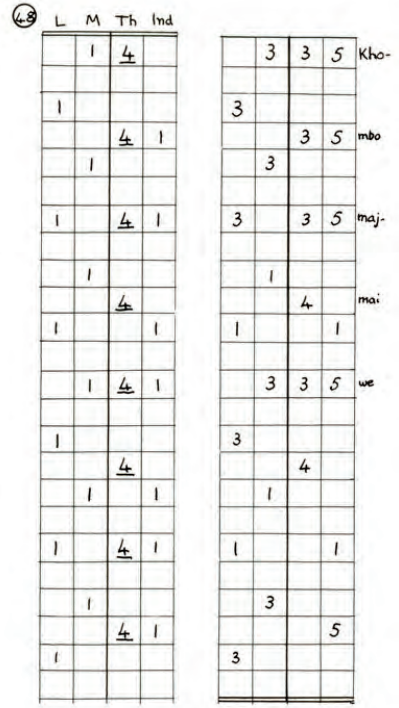
hunter in his home area; in those days this part of central Mozambique up North to the Gorongoza game park still had some of its famous wildlife. Three mbira songs of his are transcribed here: "Yomagayisa", a returnees' song, "Yokufamba", a walking song such as he could have used on the way, and "Khombo majimai-we" (Bad luck, ladies), sung for *manyanga* spirits. *Khombo,* bad luck, was a frequent theme among mbira singers. The song was meant to evoke pity for the poor *murombe*.



Transcription 15. "Yomagayisa" (Returnees), by Landani at Nyambowa, Machaze, Mozambique. V2L.4

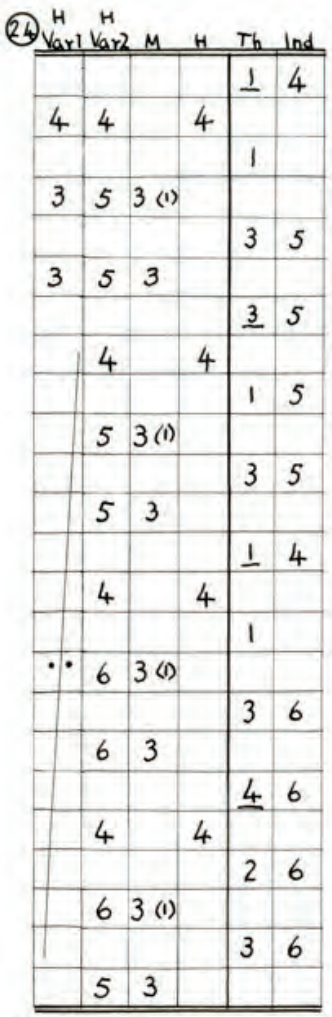


Transcription 16. "Yokufamba" (Walking song), by Landani at Nyambowa, Mozambique. V2L.1



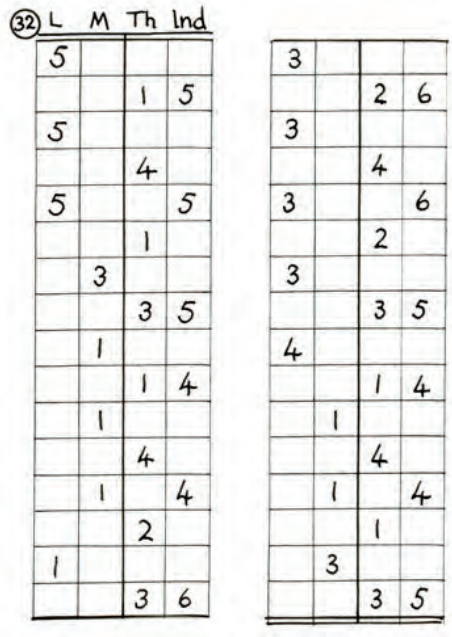
Transcription 17. "Bad luck ladies", by Landani at Nyambowa, Mozambique. V2L.6

Many *murombe* songs show this self-pitying mood of the professional beggar. The following five transcriptions provide evidence of this mood in the songs.

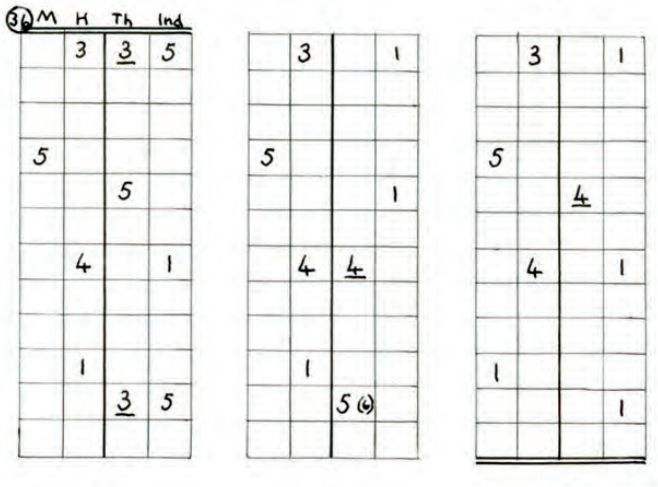


Transcription 18. "Poverty of jealousy" by Dongomera Mphete, at Shora store, Mpunga, Muriyani, Dombe, Mozambique. V2M.7

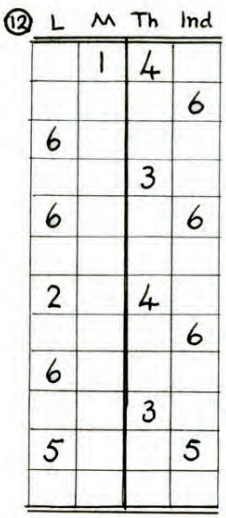
Transcription 19. "Handina baba" (I have no father), by Alfredo Ngeshavo Mlamu at Chiteve, Mashanga, Mozambique. V2V.2

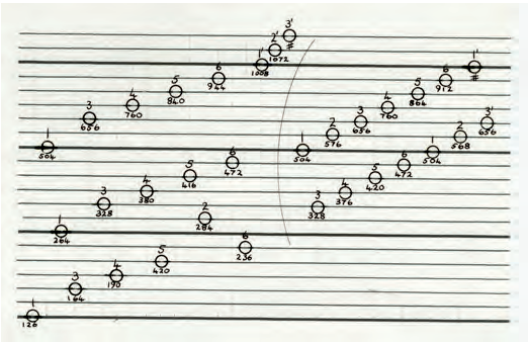


Transcription 20. "Kufa ndichakamborya mpuji" (At death I shall yet not have eaten pumpkin. "Pumpkin" is a euphemism for "woman"), by Josiah Sithole Chifuriro at Mumbu, Butiro, Machaze, Mozambique.V2M



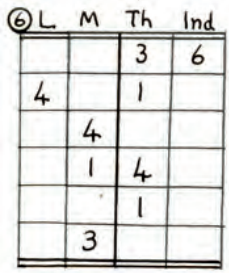
Transcription 21. "Ndalemba kutukwa pamuzi penyu" (I am tired of being cursed at your home), by Francisco Mangemba at Chikwasha, Machemeji, Mozambique. V2P.3



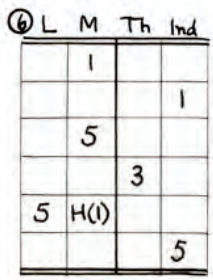


Transcription 22. "Baba guva" (Father's grave) by Mabalani at Mashanga, Mozambique.

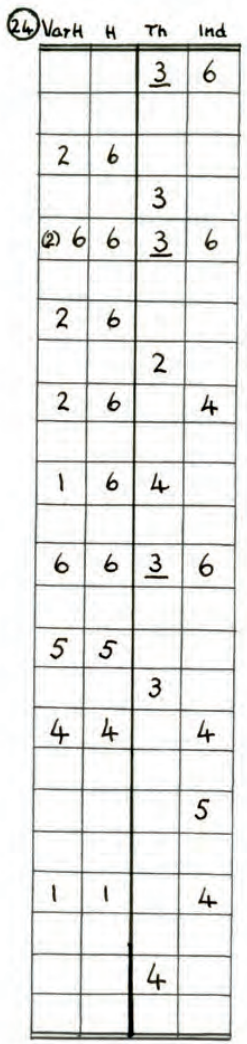
Lastly, below are a few songs to show some of the thoughts which go through the imagination of mbira players.



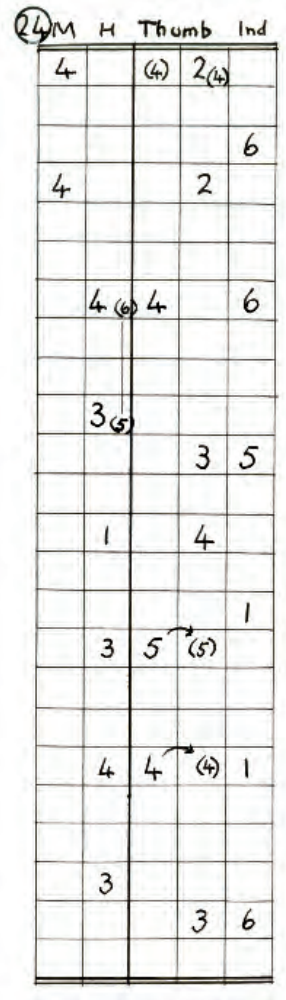
Transcription 23. “Ndichamburuka” (I shall fly), by Madakadze Peneti at Derera store, Ngorima, Zimbabwe.



Transcription 24. “Timbwa rangu” (My dog), by Mphete Dongomera at Mashanga, Mozambique.



Transcription 25. “Dandemutande” (Spider), by Zacharia Mugaduwi at Chibavava, Mozambique.



Transcription 26. "Tiende ku rozha" (Let's go to the store), by Dongomera Mphete at Shora store, Mpunga, Muriyani, Dombe, Mozambique. V2Q.7

By this time, you, the reader, may have decided that you prefer staff or tablature for writing Ndau mbira music. There is both good and bad to be said for each, as there is for the use of any notation at all. What do you think will best work to encourage the reappearance of the *mbira dzavaNdau*, to help to turn around the indifference of modern Ndau youth who "dismiss it as the relic of a bygone age … drowned in a sea of radio … cosmopolitan aspirations of modernity and Mugabe's approach to modernity" (Perman 2019)? And of course this is by no means the only part of Africa where the radio and media have played havoc with local musical diversity and indigenous expression ever since audio technology began a century or more ago.

As for myself, the time I spent with my friend Sithole and his mbira gave me some

of the best field experiences of my life. I apologise to readers for the long delay in releasing the material and remind you to write to ILAM if you should wish for more of it.[17]

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[17] If more information is required, please contact the administrator of the International Library of African Music, Ms Polisa Mpotulo at p.mpotulo@ru.ac.za or the sound engineer, Mr Elijah Madiba at e.madiba@ru.ac.za