

MOHAMBI XYLOPHONE MUSIC OF THE SHANGANA-TSONGA

by

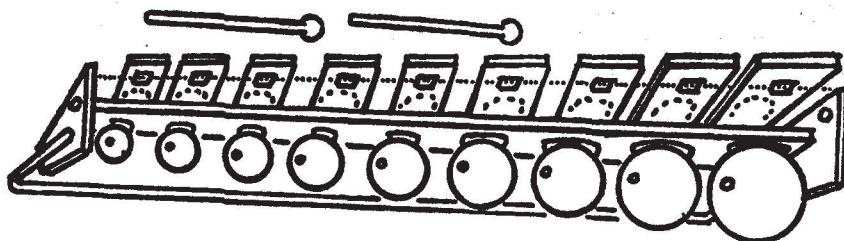
THOMAS F. JOHNSTON

The Tsonga of Mozambique and South Africa are located between the Venda in the northwest and the Chopi in the southeast¹. While the large Venda xylophones have all but disappeared in the last forty years, Chopi xylophone playing is widely practised and the Chopi orchestras are famous both in the homeland and in the Johannesburg gold-mine compounds. It is on the Chopi *timbila* that the Tsonga model their *mohambi* xylophone, often obtaining the ready-made slats by barter and then assembling a copy of the rest of the instrument themselves².

The construction of the *mohambi* is basically similar to that of the Chopi *timbila* or Tswa *muhambi*, with some simplification and substitution of materials – commercial timber for hand-hewn, for example, metal parts for wooden, nails for palm leaf ligaments, putty or chewing gum for beeswax, etc. (See sketch of an example made by Klass Maluleke at River Plat, N. Transvaal, in use 1900 – 1970).

Slat	<i>Mohambi</i> pitch V.p.s.	Av. Chopi <i>Timbila</i> pitch V.p.s.	Nearest Western equivalent
9	618	618	E \flat , – 11 (cents)
8	563	563	D \flat , + 27
7	515	510	C, – 8
6	461	461	B \flat – 19
5	417	417	A + 9
4	392	not used	G
3	373	377	G \flat + 14
2	341	341	F – 40
1	309	309	E \flat – 11

Klass Maluleke's instrument, River Plat, 1970.



¹ Ed. For a map and discussion of other aspects of Tsonga music, see the articles by Thomas Johnston in the three preceding numbers of *African Music*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2.

² Ed. *Muhambi* is also the general term for xylophone among the Tswa, neighbours of the Chopi to the northeast, who speak a dialect of Shangana and have an established xylophone tradition. For details of the construction of the Chopi *timbila* xylophone, see "Chopi Musicians", by Hugh Tracey, new edition, International African Institute, 1970.

Of particular interest is the fact that bars may be added or subtracted and that the tunings may be slightly altered. Other specimens were also observed to incorporate an 8th slat within the octave, as in the tuning given above, usually also in the 4th position up. Tsonga headmen who travel are sometimes found to possess old or mismatched sets of slats, threaded on thong loops, hanging under the eaves of their houses. They select one of these to add to the 7-slat sets obtained from the Chopi. They do not drastically retune the whole instrument, as comparison of the Tsonga and Chopi tuning figures will show. The Tsonga today do not appear to consider it necessary to tune certain of their musical instruments according to any one consistent system. In the case of the *mohambi*, it is the rhythmic, percussive quality which interests them most, rather than a particular, exact system of tuning (vocal music remains an important exception to this *laissez-faire* attitude). In making flutes, for example, the Tsonga do not adhere to any known tuning standard; three right-hand fingers are placed across the end of the reed or piece of metal pipe, and the finger holes are then bored at the most comfortable points. This does not imply, however, that Tsonga flute music is trivial; whatever the relation between the notes produced by adjacent holes, the relation between a given flute note and its harmonics (i.e. the partials yielded by the natural series) is a constant and is known beforehand.

Tonga tuning customs are related to recent history, which is that of an immigrant group surrounded by Venda, Shona, Ndaou, Chopi, Swazi, Pedi and Lovedu influences and Tsonga xylophone-playing represents acculturative results of the migrant labor situation, selective cultural borrowing and modification of approved non-Tsonga musical traits, and the simultaneous existence of different Tsonga melodies and rhythmic traditions.

Playing the *mohambi*

Often, two individuals squat side by side on the ground, facing the same side of the *mohambi*, each holding a beater in both hands. The left hand player is normally at the bass end, and his 'territory' encompasses the four left hand (bass) slats. However, one of the more interesting aspects of Tsonga *mohambi* playing is that the instrument may be reversed, the players remaining in the same position relative to the ground. In this reversal, the left hand player now plays the first four treble slats, often (but not always) executing the same motor patterns as previously. This is regarded as one way to produce variations. Musicians in the West might do well to follow their example and experiment along these lines. Hindemith and other composers have, of course, experimented with 'mirror' and 'crab' fugues, but the mirror or crab element has always been with reference to the written note and thus to intellectual music elements, rarely to the mechanical or manipulative aspect of, say, xylophone playing. If concert pianists can perform a glissando legitimately, why not utilize a celeste or glockenspiel with movable keys (rather like Orff's classroom instruments), upon which the glissando can be varied ad infinitum? This is precisely what the Tsonga do with their *mbira* handpianos; the keys of these handy instruments are moved around at will in order to produce interesting new compositions with a minimum of learning effort – one merely repeats previous thumbing patterns.

In many *mohambi* tunes, the two players appear to be engaged in producing 3-against-2, 6-against-4 or 12-against-8, although there is rarely a triplet-style melody in either part. The Tsonga tend to think of the two rhythms together as one Tsonga rhythm possessing desired qualities of tension and musical interest.

The tunes given here were performed by Elias Maluleke and Joseph Chauke, both of whom are left-handed,³ and represent that music heard on one particular occasion in

³ For the significance of left-handedness see Johnston, "Xizambi friction-bow music of the Shangana-Tsonga", *African Music*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1970.

1970. Rather than attempting to produce either Chopi-like heptatonic music or Tsonga-like pentatonic music, the performers appear to be exploiting the physical and mechanical properties of the bar layout.

The musical transcriptions

In the following transcriptions, the way in which these two performers actually view, or conceive their music is given first; it consists of the left hand player counting slats from his left, and the right hand player counting slats from his right, i.e. the slats are endowed with numbers – 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the case of the left hand player, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the case of the right hand player, the higher numbers being, of course, those in the central region of the *mohambi's* range. Beginnings of ties indicate points of dynamic stress, and the physical relation to each other of the numbers upon the page represents the actual absolute time relation in performance, 4-against-3, etc.

The Western staff translation of the tune is then given, together with the R or L stick markings and plus or minus markings indicating sharpness or flatness. However, non-Tsonga readers should guard against allowing their 'ear' to force Tsonga tunings into a Western mould, in which they are then accounted for as sharp or flat versions of Western notes. The original Tsonga *mohambi* scale (or rather the Chopi scale which the Tsonga learned) possessed a clear logic of its own, consisting of seven approximately equidistant intervals within the octave.

Concerning the metronome markings, that given is always that of the upper (treble) part, but it should not be taken to imply that this line is of primary importance. The two lines are of equal significance – partners in a polyrhythmic duet. The tempos given are for an average performance; they are faster when the players are feeling good!

Tune 1 and 2: dotted crotchet (quarter note)	= 275
Tune 3: dotted quaver (eighth note)	= 300
Tune 4: dotted quaver (eighth note)	= 175
Tune 5, 6 and 7: dotted quaver (eighth note)	= 200

The titles

1. "This is what stirs the gods". This relates to the belief that the gods of the Tsonga are often 'sleeping', and that their attention must somehow be drawn to the plight of the mortals over whom they are supposed to be watching. The piece being played is thought of as an attention-getter after misfortune has occurred, such as crop failure or death of cattle. The victim, who has usually made all the correct sacrifices etc., considers that he has been neglected by the gods.
2. "Watch out for what happens when there is lightning!" This refers to the ravages of what is thought of as the 'Bird of heaven', the lightning bird, which is believed to burn homes and kill cattle during thunderstorms. In the Transvaal this bird is the Bateleur eagle, because when it flies it makes a zigzag pattern in the air (like lightning). A whistle made from the leg bone of this bird is thought to protect one from lightning; it is also believed to be useful for bringing rain during droughts.

R-h man: 1...4...3...4...1...4...3...4...1...4...3...4...
 L-h man: 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...

Tune 1. "Hi swo swi vavisaku swikwembu" (This is what provokes the gods)
 Cycle: 12 against 8. Trans. nil.

R-h man: 3...1...4...2...5...3...4...2...3...1...4...2...
 L-h man: 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...

5...3...4...2...3...1...4...2...5...3...4...2...
 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...

Tune 2. "A langutani lexi taka ntonga ziya duma!" (Watch out for what happens when there is lightning!)
 Cycle: 24 against 16. Trans. nil.

R-h man: 3.....4.....2.....4.....1.....4.....
 L-h man: 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..

2.....4.....3.....4.....2.....4.....
 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..

1.....4.....2.....4.....3.....4.....
 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..

2.....4.....1.....4.....2.....4.....
 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..

The musical score consists of six systems of staves. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb) and a 2/4 time signature. The notation features quarter notes and eighth notes, often beamed together. Above the notes, there are rhythmic patterns of 'r' and 'l' characters, some with vertical lines above them, indicating specific rhythmic accents or patterns. The first system is labeled '24-agnst-64'. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Tune 3. "Va ta dlaya Nhongani" (They will kill Nhongani)
 Cycle: 24 against 64. Trans. nil.

R-h man: 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...
 L-h man: 3...1...4...1...5...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...

4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...
 5...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...5...1...4...1...

Tune 4. "Ndzī ta byēla mani?" (To whom shall I relate it?)
 Cycle: 16 against 24. Trans. nil.

R-h man: 1...4...3...4...1...4...3...4...1...4...3...4...
 L-h man: 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...

Tune 5. "Mhan' Manana" (Mother) Cycle: 12 against 16. Trans. nil.

3. "They will kill Nhongani". This refers to fear of witchcraft, Nhongani being the name of a person who has suffered a series of 'unexplained' misfortunes.
4. "To whom shall I relate it?" A common phrase spoken at time of misfortune, meaning "Who is there to whom I can tell all my woes?"
5. "Mother". A common exclamation of surprise.

R-h man: 3...1...4...2...5...3...4...2...3...1...4...2...
 L-h man: 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...
 5...3...4...2...3...1...4...2...5...3...4...2...
 4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1...4...1...3...1... ||

Tune 6. "Salanini" (Goodbye) Cycle: 24 against 32. Trans. nil.

- 6. "Goodbye". The usual Tsonga parting salute.
- 7. "My child". The common form of address to a young person (not necessarily related) prior to initiation. After initiation, it would constitute an insult.

R-h man: 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..
 L-h man: 3..1..4..1..5..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..
 4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..3..1..
 5..1..4..1..3..1..4..1..5..1..4..1..

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff is a rhythmic notation with notes in boxes containing 'l' and 'r', with a '24-agnst-32' bracket below it. The second and fourth staves are melodic lines with notes and rests, also featuring 'l' and 'r' rhythmic markers above them. The third staff is another rhythmic notation similar to the first. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 2/4.

Tune 7. "Rwananga" (My child) Cycle: 32 against 24. Trans. nil.