

BOOK REVIEW

The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People

(Paul Berliner. 1978. California. University of California Press)

Gadziro Gwekwerere

Introduction

Several researchers including missionaries, historians, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have studied several elements of Zimbabwean culture including religion, language and music. Findings about these elements of culture have been documented. This paper seeks to analyse the accuracy and validity of the findings by Berliner (1978) since it is apparent that some of the conclusions had misconceptions. Berliner is an American who was introduced to Zimbabwean music by Dumisani Mararire who taught African music in Seattle, Washington for several years, (Berliner 1978). Works by the scholar form a very useful base for evaluating published literature on Zimbabwean music. There is no doubt that although there might be apparent inaccuracies here and there, the literature remains valuable to the history and nature of African music.

What is with an old man is not to be asked for; he gives what he likes

The heading is a Shona proverb, *Chine musharuka hachikumbirwi. anopa sekuda kwake*. It literally means that elders are the custodians of indigenous knowledge and it is up to them to give or deny anyone the knowledge. Furusa in Mutsvairo et al (1996: 83) says, "Shona proverbs are a specific artistic activity in which the history of Shona culture is inscribed." These proverbs generalize people's experiences and way of life. They are statements of truths formulated after careful observations and experiences. The above Shona proverb implies that elderly people are the source of indigenous knowledge and they have to guard the knowledge jealously lest it is stolen or distorted by other people including scholars who may have

interest in the particular phenomena. It is up to the elders to divulge or hide certain knowledge to strangers even if they ask for the knowledge.

Oral tradition is not only an important source of information for Africans but even for Western countries. In the West there are stories that involve music or songs that were passed down centuries ago verbally or orally and still exist among the Western communities as cited by <http://www.si.umich.edu/chico/UMS/Drummers/senstats.html>

Oral tradition is when information is passed from one generation to the other by word of mouth. No written evidence would be referred to in this case. It is usually the very old people or longest surviving members of a community or family who would be privileged to recount past events relating to their way of life, customs and culture. A lot would therefore depend on the memory of the narrator and also individual choice to include or exclude aspects of the information asked for by researchers of a particular phenomena. Kileff (1997) points out that since the coming of whites to Zimbabwe, indigenous ways of life have gone through change and change has been greatest in cases where contact with foreigners has been extensive. The people of the Zambezi valley and other areas like Binga that are remote have not been as much colonized as the people in accessible areas like Harare. People in remote areas still have indigenous practices from the past such as language, dress, music and food.

Bourdillon (1998) in his book, *The Shona Peoples* acknowledges that oral tradition has been used for the past decades as a valuable source of information on the history of the people of Zimbabwe. He further states that oral tradition cannot be relied upon as a valid source of information because oral traditions are normally recounted only for a specific purpose and survive only as long as people continue to maintain an interest in the subject or phenomena. Informants apparently tend to recite and narrate aspects of their oral tradition which serve their purpose or they deliberately exclude information that they think and feel an outsider should not hear. There is no way of checking whether given information is twisted or distorted.

Nzewi (2007: 17) also observes that field researchers at times use Africans to poach indigenous knowledge and later have all the credit to themselves. Informants would only appear in one statement under acknowledgements yet, they would have been the main or chief source on untapped indigenous knowledge. Nzewi asks:

Would a mentally secure indigenous knowledge expert easily divulge the theory and logic of her sensitive knowledge practice to any arrogantly posing- to- poach researcher?

What Nzewi says about Africa also applies to Zimbabwe as in the case of Berliner (1978). Authorship and analysis of a phenomenon in African indigenous culture is cumulative and yet it is personalized in the metropolitan knowledge jingles, Nzewi (2007). By this, it is implied that normally scholars do fieldwork with the help of indigenous people who give them knowledge and yet there is no partnership in authorship. If there had been fair partnership, there would have been accurate information, perhaps. African socialization does not allow people to divulge information to strangers. They say, *Nhumbu mukadzi mukuru*

hairevi chayakadya, meaning, pregnancy is secretive and does tell how it came into being.

In the introductory chapter of his book, *Soul of Mbira*, Berliner (1978: 3), acknowledges that the old men, who are custodians of oral tradition select which information to give or withhold to foreigners and strangers when he points out:

As the days drew to an end, I casually asked *Bandambira* whether the keys of the *mbira* had any particular names. He thought for a while and then said simply, "No, I have never heard of such a thing."

Three years down the line, the same author returned to *Bandambira* (not a real name) and asked the same question only to be told that only four *mbira* keys had names. A serious scholar has to cite authorities by name so in this case *Bandambira* is not a real name but a nickname name for great *mbira* players. In the Western perspective would a serious scholar cite 'pianist' or a real name for the informant? One wonders if the later answer to the question was because the old man then wanted to tell the truth or invented the names to please the researcher who insisted on naming the *mbira* keys, a system that is common in Western music. Another factor could be that of incentives that were offered to the old man on the second visit in form of recorded music from the previous visit and a royalty cheque, Berliner (ibid). After being offered such gifts, one could be tempted to alter information and release information that pleases the rewarder (researcher) in this case. This could be taken as bribery and maybe *Bandambira* gave false information knowing that this misconception would eventually be unearthed by other scholars. If Berliner had taken time to build rapport with the informant, maybe he would have got correct information. Instead he came to collect data in short visits, Berliner (ibid).

The same author on the next two visits again received contradicting information on the names of *mbira* keys and admits that he had to destroy his notes to restart on more than two occasions. The information given to Berliner by the old man involved several *mbira* keys being allocated the same name or a *mbira* key being given a different name each time the researcher asked. The old man is said to have stopped to think for a while before reciting the *mbira* key aloud. This could have been because the old man had forgotten and was trying to recall or the worst could be that he would take time to 'cook' and fabricate a name since the researcher insisted on knowing the names.

When Berliner (1978: 7) replayed the recorded interviews with the old man about naming *mbira* he claims that there were voices in the background whispering to the old man not to divulge information to the stranger. It has never been in the Shona culture to name *mbira* keys, but just to play the keys knowing which keys produce high or deep notes. It is apparent that only *Bandambira* claimed to know this naming system and no other Zimbabwean musician claims that the *mbira* keys have specific names. Berliner (ibid) acknowledges that other experienced *mbira* players like Simon Mashoko denied that *mbira* keys have specific names. To therefore rely on information given and authenticated by one old man would be questionable. The researcher should have consulted more *mbira* players to verify this fact before publishing the findings. Other documented evidence has shown that it

is the different *mbira* types that have different names, different physical characteristics and different number of keys from one place to the other within Zimbabwe but not that *mbira* keys have always had particular names for example, *matepe*, *njari*, *nhare* and so on and so forth. Berliner doubted the information concerning the *mbira* keys but went on to publish it, which discredits his scholarly aptitude.

Western and African perspectives of studying or analyzing any phenomena differ

Although there is marked difference between Western and African musical cultures, the Western scholars seem to think that their way of thinking or analyzing music is valid for all peoples. Africans usually deal with theory and practice simultaneously; the Westerners prefer learning theory first and later the practical. Koetting (1970: 121) says, "African musicians generally do not think analytically about the music they make. They do not describe it in precise terms." One wonders whose precise terms when Africans understand themselves and their music without the use of Western principles. Berliner (1978) apparently had the same ideas in mind when he set out to travel from America to Zimbabwe to study music as evidenced in his research report Nzewi (2007: vi) points out that:

In the African musical arts, scholarship that relies solely on Northern Hemispheric prescriptions and procedures will obscure rather than elucidate the unique humanly directed, theoretical and philosophical groundings of indigenous African musical arts intellect.

Thus, African and Western musical cultures differ such that different procedures should be used for analyzing each individual musical culture. That failure to accord an appropriate procedure in analysis, unique to African musical cultures, results in fundamental inadequacies on research findings conceptualized on preconceived alien propositions. It is from such inherently deficient backdrop of analytical background that it would be unfair to misrepresent Africans by converting their indigenous knowledge systems into foreign versions of knowledge systems.

Just because the piano and guitar have specific names allocated to keys or strings respectively does not necessarily mean that all African musical instruments have keys that have specific names. There arises a problem if a scholar insists on having specific names for *mbira* keys as observed in Berliner (1978). There are several pitches on the *mbira* and on the piano, but how that knowledge is perceived by the two cultures differs.

Berliner (1978: 55) writes *mbira* music in linear form splitting the piece of music into the bass (low sounding keys) and the treble (high sounding keys) clef. This alone is un-African for African music is perceived from a holist view where the cosmological thought system starts by envisioning, perceiving and construing the whole, the unity. Nzewi (2007: v) says, "African creative theory is marked by the performance principle and theory of cyclic development of the structural inside of a known framework or viewpoint." Thus, viewing African musical arts from a linear perspective is on its own wrong and a misrepresentation of the reality. Not only are the African musical arts cyclic but other arts like dwelling huts,

kraals and children's games take the cyclic structure and shape.

The nature of *mbira* music differs from that of any Western instrumental music. There cannot be a realistic comparative analysis of *mbira* and any given Western musical instrument. Berliner (ibid: 53) admits that notating *mbira* music using the Western scale is not accurate when he states that:

Because of the elusive nature of *mbira* music, the visual representations provided in this chapter cannot portray the musical event in full, but only illustrate points about certain aspects of the music.

Thus, the illustrations of *mbira* music by Berliner are not definitely accurate as the Western staff cannot fully represent African sounds. Notation, whether on the staff or tablature does not accurately stand in for African musical sounds. Even the scale of *mbira* keys should never be compared to the Western octave as the two are different.

African indigenous music's scale system is standard such that it gives the idiomatic stamp to the corpus of melodic music from the culture and any creative person could compose a tune with any number or range of notes from the cultural scale, Nzewi (ibid: 15) Thus, there is no modulation or singing out of tune as claimed by Berliner (ibid: 196) when he says that ensembles would compete or that the audience would judge performers and opt for better performers. One other point about African music is that it has the humanistic principle of inclusiveness such that everybody is free to take part in music making, especially singing. Clefs do not matter but the starting pitch should be such that it allows all interested people to sing too.

The use of space and silence differs as far as African and Western music is concerned. While there are periods of silence in Western music called rests, according to Nzewi (2007: 34) absence of audible sound in African music does not imply rests. It is said that it is an interactive space intended to include a listener or co-performer in a creative or production process.

The notion of pleasant music is also not the same between the Africans and Westerners. Nzewi (ibid) believes that to an African, what is beautiful, pleasing or sweet to the senses is, more often than not, unhealthy for the mind and body. African musical arts' beauty is concerned with the inside or rather the effectiveness of the music than the superficial beauty in a given piece of music like in the Western perspective.

Misconceptions on Zimbabwean musical arts by Berliner

It is worth noting that both researchers, Berliner conducted fieldwork in and around Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare but their research findings seem to have been generalized across Zimbabwe. It should be noted that there are several music cultures in Zimbabwe which are shaped on ethnic and tribal lines therefore, what happens in Harare does not necessarily happen the same way in Bulawayo or any other part of Zimbabwe. Berliner (1978: xii) says:

The Shona people of Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) are among those people in Africa who place a special significance and value on the *mbira*.

This is true to a limited extent because the Shona people are divided into about five ethnic groups and dialects. These are the *Zezeru*, *Manyika*, *Karanga*, *Ndau* and *Korekore*. Of these, it is mainly the *Zezeru* who place special importance on *mbira* and use it for religious purposes. The other four mainly value the drum (*ngoma*) because of its use in religious purposes. All in all, it is not all Shona people who value *mbira* but some do, depending on its use for ritual, religious and ceremonial functions.

Throughout his discussion in *Soul of Mbira*, Berliner refers to the large *mbira dzavadzimu* (*mbira* for ancestral spirits). The *mbira* that he refers to is actually called *nhare*. This *mbira* has keys that vary from twenty- two up to twenty- five keys, depending on the manufacturer. Each tribe would have their own *mbira* for appeasing ancestral spirits which could be *nhare*, *nyunganyunga*, *matepe*, *njari* etc, depending on which type of *mbira* the ancestor used to enjoy as a living being.

Berliner (1978: 35) says:

While the *mbira dzavadzimu* can be played for entertainment outside of religious ceremonies, its players report that, unlike other *mbira*, the *mbira dzavadzimu* is not "for playing in the beer halls. The *njari* and *matepe*, however can be played in the beer halls or for spirit possession.

The truth is that any *mbira* type can be played anywhere as long as that particular instrument (*mbira*) is not used for ancestral worship. Instruments for ancestral rituals are supposed to be revered and playing them elsewhere could offend the spirits such that they refuse to manifest during ancestral rituals.

Resonators for the *mbira* are usually made out of large pumpkin gourds and these are found within selected communities where this special type of pumpkin grows. It is a misconception to state that:

Unless a musician is very wealthy he usually keeps the same gourd until it has been stitched in so many places that it no longer resonates the *mbira* well, Berliner (ibid: 38).

Thus, being wealthy or not has nothing to do with having a new gourd as a resonator since these are naturally readily available resources. Besides, members from the local community donate such resources to great players since these players in most cases are involved in religious ceremonies for the whole village or even tribe. Watching a *mbira* player with a worn out resonator does not imply poverty and this should never be associated with

one's economic status. Nzewi (2007: vi) also supports the idea of African communal support when he says, "In the original Africa, a person was not allowed to be poor and isolated when the family, the compound group or the community, in that telescoped order of responsibility, had the shared wherewithal for sustenance."

On page 40, Berliner (1978) points out that some *mbira* players play with great force during ceremonies such that they have broken *mbira* keys. One wonders how human fingers can break metal keys. This is an exaggeration of facts and the implication is that *mbira* players end up without fingers too, having broken them during rituals. The manner of playing actually reflects commitment and passion since the music has to do with ancestral rituals.

Mauch as cited by Berliner (1978: 43) writes that *mbira* music was popularly used to accompany the chores of farming, such as when "girls and boys thresh corn together", and mentions the performance of *mbira* by a blind beggar. There is music specifically for threshing and this music is in the form of work songs and everybody performs the music as they thresh. It would be ridiculous to have a few people playing the *mbira* whilst others are threshing and labouring. *Mbira* has never been used as part of work songs. The threshing sticks are used as musical instruments and produce rhythmic sounds as they hit the corn on the ground. This type of music provides a constant rhythm for people working as a group and the music breaks monotony when people are faced with a labourious task.

On page 128, Berliner (1978) claims that a *mbira* player called Simon Mashoko claims that if he spent time without playing the *mbira* instrument, the instrument that is usually kept under the bed would make sounds on its own, calling upon the owner to play it. This is no myth but just false information. Mashoko used to be a Catholic priest and did not actually have anything to do with ancestral veneration, though he was a great *mbira* player. The informant ends up giving researchers funny or unrealistic stories if too much pressure is exerted on them. Perhaps Berliner misinterpreted a joke or hyperbole since jokes differ across societies and cultures.

Mashave spirits are alien spirits which may belong to a different race or tribe or any person one is not related to. When possessed by such a spirit the medium speaks a language that they would not comprehend under normal circumstances. The possessed at times have talent in performing certain activities when under the influence of the *mashave* spirits and this ability can either be positive or negative. This has nothing to do with spirits of persons who did not receive proper burial rites at death as claimed by Berliner (ibid: 187).

One other misconception by Berliner (1978: 196) says:

On such occasions the villagers give each musician or ensemble a chance to demonstrate their skills, and then they select the best players to perform for the remainder of the evening.

Only selected musicians perform at ceremonies for appeasing ancestral spirits. One would conclude that the researcher attended a *mbira* gala where performers would compete. Ritual or sacred musical ceremonies are attended by selected musicians and participants. Performers for religious rituals are selected according to specific religious beliefs, the

community elders also assist in selecting performers from among fellow villagers and the spirit mediums also have a hand in appointing performers. Spirits may not be invoked if unsuitable performers are selected.

When the second group of musicians first arrived outside of the *banya*, the villagers prevailed upon them to perform, expressing their dissatisfaction with the first group. The *churning* of their *mbira* was not pleasing to them, the musicians did not play with enough power to make people dance well, and they took breaks for beer too frequently between tunes, Berliner (1978: 196).

Thus, the above impression is that *mbira* music should be pleasing to the audience and yet the correct fact is that the music should be appealing to the spirit. Whether the rest of the people are pleased by the music to the extent of dancing is not important. The Spirit mediums are the ones that need to dance or respond to the music so as to get possessed. The rest of the people are just there to support the spirit mediums. It is also not the energy exerted on performing that matters but that the music should be appealing to the spirit mediums.

On page 199 Berliner claims that *Bandambira* was hired to play *mbira* at a *bira* and played for more than two days because the spirit was stubborn and refused to manifest. *Bandambira* was said to have admitted failure and defeat but it is not only the music that may result in the spirit refusing to manifest. There are a lot of taboos or dos and don'ts that come with indigenous rituals. Some of the participants may be 'unclean' due to sleeping with their spouses during the ceremony or ritual. Even if people are married they should abstain till the period of the ritual is over. This even affects people who would have brewed the special beer for ancestral rituals.

Berliner (1978: 203) further misrepresents facts about Zimbabwean music by claiming that:

One villager said that "the music [at a particular ceremony] was so well done that the spirits were hovering about waiting to appear". A singer remarked that the music was so nice it made her want to become possessed, and one man said that on a certain occasion the music was so good that the spirits were even possessing children.

Even from a euro centric perspective, it is ridiculous to say that spirits are visible. How can spirits wait as if they are tangible objects. The spirits, even in the African perspective are invisible and the only sign that someone is possessed is getting into a trance and behaving differently as in talking or walking. A female who is possessed by a male spirit can start talking in a deep male voice and vice versa. The atmosphere must have been ecstatic. Another researcher, Bourdillon (1998: 222) says:

The Shona are vague as to the nature of the spirit's presence in any of these objects: when questioned, they say that the spirit might be in the object concerned, but that they do not really know since one cannot see the spirit and their fathers never explained it to them.

It is true that the spirit cannot be visualized by the Shona. To say that people are vague just because they think differently is not fair. One wonders if Westerners such as Bourdillon are not also vague in this area since they believe that spirits are invisible but exist and affect people.

Conclusion

African scholars and researchers of musical arts seriously need to take time to study their own indigenous knowledge systems and correct some of the misconceptions. As long as they remain passive in areas of researching and creating new knowledge systems, other scholars will continue to misrepresent their cultural music. Not all information by scholars is wrong but if a researcher is not sure about other people's cultures, they should not misrepresent facts. Researchers are at times more interested in financial and personal benefits of publishing at the expense of the validity and accuracy of their findings.

The study of Africology needs to be pursued by genuine researchers so that African children are not poisoned by inaccurate publications. Africans have the following saying, "Until lions have their own historians, stories about hunting will always glorify the hunter and downplay the hunted." So, unless and until Africans do research about themselves, foreigners will continue to glorify themselves and also continue to be glorified by Africans. Publications on African musical arts without prejudice and distortions are what the world should be looking forward to having.

Published Sources

- Berliner, P. 1978. *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe*. California: University of California Press
- Bourdillon, M. F. C. 1998. *The Shona Peoples*. Gweru: Mambo Press
- Gelfand, M. 1976. *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture*. Gweru: Mambo Press
- Kileff, C and Killeff, P. 1997 *Shona Customs*. Gweru: Mambo Press
- Koetting J. 1970. "Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music." *Selected Reports*, 115- 146
- Nzewi, M. 2007 *A Contemporary Study of Musical Arts: Informed by African Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Volume 4: Illustrations, reflections and explorations*. Pretoria: Ciimda.
- Mutsvairo, S., Chiwome, E., Mberi, H. E., Masasire, A. and Furusa, M. 1996. *Introduction To Shona Culture*. Kwekwe: Juta Zimbabwe (Pvt) Limited

Electronic Media

<http://www.si.umich.edu/chico/UMS/Drummers/senstats.html>