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# Research Report

## Vocal Styles Accompanying Mbira DzaVadzimu

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The *mbira dzavadzimu* (mbira of the ancestral spirits) is a Shona instrument closely associated with religious worship in Rhodesia. Mbira ensembles perform at all-night religious ceremonies which culminate in the possession of spirit mediums. In both religious and secular contexts, listeners report that the *mbira dzavadzimu* makes a person 'think deeply' or 'think too much'. Through the vocal styles, performers interpret the instrumental music and express their deep thoughts and feelings.

The complexity of patterns which mbira music presents to the ear approximates to what a 'kaleidoscope' presents to the eye.<sup>1</sup> Different 'tunes' can be heard in the music even when the musician does not introduce new variations into his playing.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the performance of a mbira piece, interwoven melodic lines change and interact with one another. While listening to inner parts of the mbira music, the singer selects melodic-rhythmic patterns which become the basis for the vocal parts. These patterns themselves 'suggest' the vocal parts to the performer. Thus, in the process of singing, the performer interprets the mbira music and accompanies the instrument, rather than vice versa.

Three vocal styles are used to accompany the mbira: *Mahon'era* (lit. humming) is a non-

verbal style sung in response to the low melodic parts of the mbira music; it makes use of such vocables as *wha-huwha-huwha-whu*. In contrast, *huro* (lit. throat) in a high syllabic style in which the voice is 'moulded' to the upper melodic parts of the mbira music; it uses such vocables as *wo-i-ye . . . i-ye . . . iye*, as well as a stylized form of Shona yodelling. The third vocal style is *kudeketera*, an improvised poetry which accompanies the mbira music. Although this is primarily a sung poetry, singers periodically shift into more of a talking mode (*kutaura*) during their performances. Kauffman has reported the use of *kudeketera* for the 'expression of personal troubles'.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, my own research indicates that the *kudeketera* 'texts' deal with a wide range of subjects. Similar to mbira music itself, the *kudeketera* lines do not follow a continuous thematic development. Rather, they present a mosaic of texts dealing with aspects of the total life experiences of those participating in the music. The themes of *kudeketera* range from humour and social commentary to proverbs and the mourning of the ancestral spirits, reflecting the world view of the Shona people. In performing this style, the singer's choice of words is governed largely by the melodic-rhythmic patterns which he or she hears in the mbira music at the time of the performance.

During a religious ceremony at which the *mbira dzavadzimu* is played, the *kudeketera* texts are alternated and intermixed with the performance of *huro* and *mahon'era*. Each participant adds his or her own parts to the larger musical event. The *kudeketera* contributes greatly to the mood of pathos which prevails throughout the evening. The cathartic

effect of the music is enhanced by song 'texts' about known people and common plights. The 'texts' frequently use proverbs and religious or historical themes which serve to perpetuate respect for traditional Shona values and to intensify the effect of the music as a social force within the community.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>G. Kubik, 'The phenomenon of inherent rhythms in East and Central African instrumental music', *African Music*, 1962 3, i, 42.  
<sup>2</sup>A. Tracey, *How to Play the Mbira (Dza Vadzimu)*, Roodepoort, International Library of African Music, 1970, p.12.  
<sup>3</sup>R. A. Kauffman, 'Multipart relationships in the Shona music of Rhodesia', University of California, Los Angeles, Ph.D. thesis, 1971, p.132.