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Shona Women *Mbira* Players: Gender, Tradition and Nation in Zimbabwe

Claire Jones

This article explores the intersection of gendered concepts of tradition and nation in the musical and spiritual lives of the Shona people. Women performers of the mbira dzavadzimu, an instrument closely associated with traditional religious practices of spirit possession, negotiate gendered barriers to participation specific to the instrument. The article foregrounds the experiences of five women musicians whose careers span the colonial and post-colonial eras, as performance contexts have extended from traditional to commercial settings and onto the international stage.

Keywords: Music-Shona; Mbira; Gender; Tradition; Cultural Nationalism; Spirit Possession

I started playing *mbira*. At first she [my mother] didn't want to believe it. And then I told her, 'Mummy, let me go and record this.' [The Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation] broadcasting people said 'Do you know how to play *mbira*?' . . . they were laughing at me. They say, 'She's mad, this woman! Why she want to go and play *mbira*? *Mbira* is not for womens!' Even mummy says, 'Are you mad? Women don't play this—it's for a man!' (Beauler Dyoko, cited in Impey 1992, 178–9)

Pioneering musician and band leader Beauler Dyoko was the first Zimbabwean woman to make a commercial recording of Shona *mbira* music, in 1962 (Dyoko interview 1996). Born in 1945, Ambuya¹ Beauler is a spirit medium who was called to the instrument by the spirit of her deceased father and became a regular performer of the *mbira dzavadzimu* ('*mbira* of the ancestral spirits') in religious possession ceremonies. In the course of a musical career sanctioned by the spirit, she has led

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several *mbira* ensembles—one of them all women—entertaining patrons in the beer gardens and nightclubs of Harare's townships. As a professional musician who has made a number of tours abroad, Ambuya Beauler is in the business of performing and promoting traditional Shona music. Ironically, however, her activities and those of other women *mbira* players are marginalized and devalued by gendered interpretations of traditional roles and practices: 'Women playing music? It's not part of our culture' (see also Impey 1992, 121).

Like Beauler Dyoko, many players of the *mbira dzavadzimu* operate at the juncture between the material world of the living and the spiritual realm of the ancestors. My purpose in this article is to examine the intersection of gender ideologies and discourses of tradition and nation in the musical and spiritual worlds of the Shona people, the majority ethno-linguistic group of Zimbabwe.² Following a theoretical discussion on the gendered constructions of tradition and nationalism, I describe the significance and meanings of *mbira* and musicality in Shona culture. I look at factors and constraints that influence who becomes a *mbira* player (*gwenyambira*: literally, 'one who scratches the *mbira* keys'). This includes consideration of the meaning and significance of spiritual 'callings' to the instrument. The *mbira* has become emblematic of 'culture' in Zimbabwe, virtually a national instrument,³ and I outline the nationalist initiatives and developments that have imparted symbolic meaning to the instrument and the religious practices with which it is associated. The latter portion of the paper is concerned with the socio-historical circumstances surrounding the movement of women *mbira* players from ceremonial performance contexts into commercial ones, and an exploration of the gendered space of the music industry.

The beauty and complexity of Shona *mbira* music has drawn its share of ethnomusicological attention, and two major and influential works stand out. Berliner (1978) called attention to the cultural significance and intricate polyphonies of the *mbira dzavadzimu*, and Turino (2000) traced the historical development of Zimbabwean popular music in relation to nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Neither, however, has much to say about women performers or the gender dynamics of musical practices. This article foregrounds the careers and experiences of five prominent women *mbira* players, each of whom leads her own band or performance group. They are the two pioneers of the pre-independence period, Beauler Dyoko and Stella Chiweshe; a player some ten years their junior, Irene Chigamba; and two from a younger generation, both born in the 1970s, Benita Tarupiwa and Chiwoniso Maraire. This article is also grounded in my own experiences as a white American participant-observer. A *mbira* player myself, I have been a student and researcher of Zimbabwean music for over three decades and performed for five years in Zimbabwe with the late Mondrek Muchena (1939–95) and his *mbira* group Mhuri Yekwa Muchena ('Family of Muchena').⁴

Gender, Tradition and Gendered Time

The construction of traditions instrumental to claims about ethnicity, national identity and renderings of history has been a central focus of anthropological and historical researchers for over two decades. Contributors to the influential 1983 Hobsbawm and Ranger anthology portrayed wholesale ‘invention of tradition’, largely by colonizers and elites. Subsequent scholars—including Ranger himself (1993)—have shifted to descriptions of less unilateral and inauthentic processes such as ‘imagining’ (cf. Anderson 1983), and to the ‘objectification’ of traditions as reification of cultural patterns for political or other purposes (see, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 1987, 195).

The interaction of gender and gender ideologies with discourses of tradition was largely absent from the early work, but many more recent studies have documented gendered ‘inventions’ and re-interpretations of roles in colonial Africa (such as Callaway 1987; Hunt 1990). The most nuanced of these reveal the active agency of both colonizer and colonized; for instance, efforts to ‘domesticate’ African women resulted in selection and re-invention of European models by indigenous Africans (Hansen 1992). Martin Chanock’s pioneering study (1985) of the production of customary law in Malawi and Zambia revealed an alliance of colonialists and African patriarchy with common interests in keeping both women and junior men subordinate. Such work has demonstrated, in the words of Cherryl Walker, that ‘what gets cast as custom or tradition and therefore sacrosanct is a product of a complex, dynamic and frequently ambiguous history of contestation, co-option and reconstruction’ (1994, 349).

It should be evident by now that few constructs of culture are free of gender bias. Interpretations of traditional practices and roles, musical and otherwise, carry built-in gender expectations and frequently serve the interests of a narrow sector of society. In many cases, the accepted dicta on cultural traditions come from male authority figures presumed to speak for the entire community. Gendered discourses of tradition and culture may serve to legitimate indigenous patriarchal authority; uneven gender relations, as we shall see, play a significant role in shaping subsequent cultural production.

National cultures are as gendered as the notions of tradition and modernity on which they depend. In the wake of Benedict Anderson’s now famous formulation of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (1983), most current scholarship views nations as socially constructed entities rather than natural collectivities. It has taken the interventions of feminist scholars, however, to deconstruct the gendered imaginings of nationalism and the biases inherent in nationalist ideologies (see, for example, Kandiyoti 1991; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). They have called attention to the institutionalization of gender differences in definitions and images of the nation and national identities; nationalism is gendered through vocabulary and metaphors such as the ‘motherland’ and the ‘patriarchal’ state. The symbols and images associated

with nationhood are as effective as social pressures in constituting, institutionalizing and preserving asymmetrical gender roles.

Anne McClintock argues that 'nation time' is itself gendered (1993). As 'the modern Janus' (cf. Nairn 1977), the nation presents itself as a forward-looking state while simultaneously gazing into the past to affirm a communally held heritage. Nationalist endeavours, suggests McClintock, reconcile the contradictory impulses toward tradition and modernity by figuring them 'as a "natural" division of *gender*' (1993, 66). Women are typically represented as the authentic bearers of national tradition—embodying continuity—while men are construed as the agents of progress and modernity—embodying revolutionary discontinuity. Thus McClintock views the genderedness of nationalism as produced through the gendering of time.

There is no single model or narrative of the nation; rather, there are multiple nationalisms. Feminist and 'genderist'⁵ scholars have begun to build a literature of the diverse and historically specific 'mappings of gender, nation, and music' (Moisala and Diamond 2000, 216; see articles in part 3, 219–81). Of special interest to my project is a 1994 article by Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner: 'Song, Story and Nation' focuses on three singers in an exploration of the uneasy relations between Zimbabwean women artists, urban performance spaces, and nationalist ideas. One of the three, *mbira* player/vocalist Stella Chiweshe, is also featured here, and I draw on their insights into her career. The Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner piece is an excellent first step towards elucidating the struggles of Zimbabwean women artists in relation to the changing narratives of the nation. Stella Chiweshe, Beauler Dyoko, and the other women *mbira* players negotiate gendered ideologies that are entangled with discourses of tradition and nationalism specific to the instrument they play. I turn now to the *mbira*⁶ and the complex of religious practices and spiritual beliefs with which it is intimately associated.

Shona *Mbira* and Musical-Spiritual Practices

Nowhere is the class of lamellaphones as highly developed and the music as richly complex and important in indigenous religious life as in Zimbabwe, where *mbira*-type instruments have been played for 600 years or more (see Jones 1992, 110).⁷ There are at least five distinct types of *mbira* played by Shona peoples, each consisting of one or more rows of different sized metal tongues (or keys) mounted on a wooden soundboard. The keys are struck with the thumbs and forefingers, and the instrument is propped inside a gourd calabash resonator (these days often made of fibreglass) to amplify the sound. The Shona *mbira* differ in the number and layout of keys, their repertoires and performance contexts as well as their regional distribution. Local music educators have adapted a 15-key variant of the *karimba*, played in Zambia and Mozambique as well as Zimbabwe, for use in schools. This instrument, also called *Nyungwe nyungwe* or *nyunga nyunga*⁸ *mbira*, is not traditionally associated with indigenous spirit possession practices (Jones 2006, 104). Spread through the educational system, it is now found in many urban areas of the country.

The instrument of interest to us, and the focus of Paul Berliner's classic ethnography *The Soul of Mbira* (1978), is the 22- to 25-key *mbira dzavadzimu*.⁹ Largely associated with the Zezuru people of the central Mashonaland region surrounding the capital Harare, this *mbira* has garnered most attention both in and outside of Zimbabwe. By the 1960s this particular instrument had become the most common *mbira* for a variety of reasons, not the least being the access to radio broadcasting and recording studios enjoyed by players residing in and around the capital city (Jones 1992, 29; Turino 1998). As the name implies, a central function of the *mbira dzavadzimu* is in ceremonies for the *vadzimu* (singular: *mudzimu*) ancestral spirits: the spirit elders (mothers, grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers) of the immediate family who look after their living descendants. Nonetheless, the instrument is played in many contexts and for diverse types of entertainment, alone or in groups. The appellation *dzavadzimu* may also be applied to some of the other large Shona *mbira* which are played for spirit possession as well (see, for example, Jones 1992, 112 on *njari* and *matepe*).

The Shona share with many southern African Bantu peoples the belief that the spirits of deceased ancestors continue to play an active role in their descendants' lives. Spirit possession ceremonies such as the *bira* (pl. *mapira*) are an integral part of Shona religion and world-view. *Mapira* ritual gatherings are held to honour, appease, and consult with the ancestral *vadzimu* and/or royal *mhondoro*¹⁰ spirits. Women brew traditional millet beer in preparation and the extended family is called to attend an all-night ceremony. Music is one of the ritual elements generally required to bring about possession (Maraire 1990). The *vadzimu* are said to 'come out' (possess their mediums) when music with which they were familiar and/or specific songs they enjoyed during their lifetime are performed. A small group of respected musicians, often paid for their services, takes the leading role in providing music which requires everyone's participation.

In the *mbira*-playing regions, two or more *gwenyambira* accompanied by traditional gourd rattles (*hosho*) perform a centuries-old repertoire of songs associated with the ancestors. Participants of both sexes sing, dance, clap and ululate in a communal atmosphere which is both festive and serious in intent. If the music is performed well and if ritual procedures have been carried out properly, one or more spirits will possess their mediums. In a possession trance (which may last several hours), the medium takes on the personality and voice of the deceased, and commands the authority of the spirit in accordance with his or her rank in the patrilineage. The music stops while the gathered descendants greet the *vadzimu* and ask for guidance.

Women play active musical roles in the possession ceremonies, singing, dancing and playing *hosho*. They participate on a par with men—and often initiate or take the lead—in secular contexts such as communal musical gatherings and traditional dance clubs (Jones 2006, 158). Yet most *mbira* players are men, whether the instrument is performed in private or at public venues. This gender asymmetry applies across the board amongst the Shona; performance of any instrument requiring more than a

moderate level of expertise is generally the province of male specialists. The dearth of women instrumentalists is certainly not peculiar to Zimbabwe, and has been noted in other parts of Africa and beyond. Even so, there may actually be more adult women performers of the *mbira* than of any other Zimbabwean instrument, old or new. While women commonly play *hosho* and *ngoma* (drum)—at which many are quite accomplished—I have never seen or heard of Zimbabwean women playing any other indigenous Shona instruments (e.g. musical bows or panpipes).¹¹

Mbira represents an interesting case in that conflicting discourses of gender and tradition, combined with the local histories of *mbira* and the music industry, simultaneously affirm and deny women's connection to the *mbira*. Due to its ancient history and ancestral associations in Zimbabwe, the past is the domain of the *mbira dzavadzimu*. Ironically, this implies an appropriate relation between women (as culture-bearers) and *mbira*. Yet claims about tradition and musical practice—declarations that it's 'not part of our culture'—continue to constrain women's musical activities. As Angela Impey (1992) has shown for Zimbabwean women instrumentalists in general, those who take up the *mbira* defy the circumscribed gender roles and social pressures that have militated against their playing. I introduce some of them in the following section.

Gwenyambira: Why Does She play?

Ambuya Beauler Dyoko freely recounts the story of her possession and call to *mbira* in the early 1960s. She began feeling sick and sore, fainting and losing weight, but Western doctors could not help her. To Shona-speakers who practice *pasichigare*, the ways of the ancestors, these were the typical symptoms of a spiritual affliction. Beauler told her mother repeatedly, 'I'm dreaming [of] playing *mbira*'. Her mother, not believing that a woman could play, did nothing for over a year. When a *n'anga* (traditional healer, diviner) made the diagnosis that a *mbira*-playing ancestor wanted to possess Beauler, Amai ('mother'/Mrs) Dyoko decided to brew some beer and hold a *bira* for her daughter. The spirit who emerged was Beauler's deceased father, saying 'I'm here. I came for her to play *mbira* what I was doing. She [Beauler] must do what I was doing'. He also called on her to become a *n'anga* and herbalist as he had been. Now that the spirit had appeared and been accepted, Amai Dyoko bought Beauler a *mbira* to complete the healing process. Beauler recalled, 'That night I took that *mbira* and put it by the pillow there. I started dreaming playing *Nhemamusasa*. And in the morning I got up, I took that *mbira* and started playing, I played *Nhemamusasa*' (Dyoko interview 2001).¹²

Ambuya Beauler was not the only woman to have a difficult time convincing others that she was serious about playing *mbira*. Around the time Beauler made her first recording, Stella Chiweshe (b. 1946), then living in Bindura (north of Harare), was pointed out as a potential *gwenyambira* by a family *mudzimu* spirit (Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner 1994, 131–2). When the teenaged Stella became captivated by the sound of *mbira* she began looking for a teacher, but, she told me: 'It took a long time for

people to accept just the word that I wanted to learn, they did not understand how much I wanted to be with *mbira* all the time. I felt pain, this big lump, a hot one, in my heart. Ah, it took me two years to find somebody to teach me' (Chiweshe interview 2000). Finally in 1964 an uncle agreed to teach the young woman to play *mbira*—a controversial undertaking. Like Beauler, Stella eventually began to play in *mapira* possession ceremonies. She recorded her first 45 rpm single, *Kasahwa*, in 1974. It was a hit, and she followed with 24 more singles over the next six years.

Stella Chiweshe was an original member of the Zimbabwe National Dance Troupe following the country's independence in 1980. In 1985 she left to form her own band, The Earthquake, the first to combine *mbira* with the modern Zimbabwean marimba as well as electric guitars (Jones 2006, 274–7). Based in Germany for the past 20 years, Ambuya Stella is better known today than Beauler Dyoko, both domestically and internationally. In the latter stages of her career she has acted primarily as a popularizer of *mbira*, bringing the music to audiences outside the cultural context of the *bira* and beyond the realm of the *vadzimu*; Figure 1 shows Ambuya in performance at a WOMAD festival in 2006. Despite the innovative approach to indigenous instrumentation, Chiweshe's spiritual calling is reflected in her stage presence. When dancing she cuts an imposing and regal figure as an elder who commands respect; while seated, she may partake of the snuff that is associated with the ancestral spirits. Although Ambuya Chiweshe plays some original compositions, her repertoire and lyrics are derived largely from traditional Shona *mbira* pieces and



Figure 1 Ambuya Stella Chiweshe in performance (photo by Damian Rafferty, flyglobalmusic.com).

songs in various indigenous dance/drum genres. As Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner wrote, ‘one dimension which she always carries with her is the liminal space of the spirit medium and the sense that her music . . . resonates with the experiences of earlier voices which register their presence in and through the *mbira* music’ (1994, 131).

Shown in Figure 2, the home-grown image of Ambuya Beauler Dyoko wearing a beaded headdress and the black-and-white robes of a spirit medium appeared on the cover of her locally produced cassette tape *ABD: Ambuya Beauler Dyoko* (1995). The cassette—her only commercial album-length recording—features traditional *mbira* pieces performed on an ‘electric-*mbira*’ line-up with original lyrics composed by Ambuya. Many of her themes are woman-centred; on the opening number *Munovhaira* (‘You are too proud’), she sings of a woman who refuses her husband’s request for money after he has spent the entire weekend drinking. Ambuya Beauler makes no bones about acknowledging the spiritual source of her music. Her liner notes declare: ‘Thanks to my late father for teaching me *mbira* music in my dreams’.

Beauler Dyoko and Stella Chiweshe blazed a trail for subsequent women *mbira* players, claiming their place in the public eye as star performers whilst championing Shona tradition. The fact that they have emphasized rather than hidden their spirituality has probably facilitated their eventual acceptance as professional women musicians. This is not to imply that either of them intentionally exploits iconic



Figure 2 Beauler Dyoko, cassette cover for *ABD: Ambuya Beauler Dyoko* (RTP, 1995).

'Mother Africa' images in order to further her career; rather, their personal practices and personae intersect with elements of these stereotypes. As suggested in Figure 1, Ambuya Chiweshe in particular projects a cosmopolitan appearance with great appeal to world music audiences, one that also taps into romanticized notions of exotic African spirituality. However, both women resist reduction to the status of emblematic figures through actively performing the deep connection of the *mbira* to Shona ancestral religion and lifeways. Appreciating the spiritual connections between these artists and the *mbira*—and attempting to disentangle the gendered ideologies and interpretations of tradition—calls for a deeper look at Shona cosmology and some of the discourse and (contested) cultural beliefs concerning spirituality as it relates to *mbira* playing.

None of the Shona *mbira* are sacred or ritually proscribed instruments. There are no restrictions as to who may make or touch them, or who may perform the instruments in ceremonial contexts. What factors, then, influence who becomes a *gwenyambira*? In pre-colonial Shona society, the male heads of patrilineal descent groups were the primary decision-making and property-holding individuals. Divisions of labour and gender roles were closely delimited, with men officially ascribed higher status and greater authority than women. Most anthropologists believe, however, that although women were under the control of male institutions, their labour and contributions to the patrilineage were highly valued.¹³ The role of a specialist musician is not a hereditary institution in Shona culture (as it is among the Mande of West Africa, for example), but specializations such as *mbira* playing customarily ran in families. To this day many kinship groups have long-standing *mbira* traditions, and family members may take up the instrument as a matter of course. One of the younger generation of women players, Benita Tarupiwa (b. 1971), comes from such a family and began playing at the age of 4; she recounts that all but one of her seven brothers and sisters grew up playing *mbira* (interview 2000).

ChiShona-speakers acknowledge, however, that not everyone has equal aptitude for playing a musical instrument. According to *pasichigare* beliefs, talent for certain skills such as healing, hunting, and music is conferred by spirits known as *mashave* (singular: *shave*). The *mashave* include animal spirits and the spirits of people unrelated to the medium (e.g. 'alien spirits'); some *mashave* dancing spirits only emerge to dance at ceremonies. Disembodied spirits known as *mashave risinga budi* (literally, '*mashave* who do not come out') possess their mediums without visibly manifesting through a possession trance.¹⁴ Any person exhibiting extraordinary abilities is liable to be considered to be the host of a *shave* spirit, and many *mbira* players and instrument builders attribute their talent to such spirits. In many cases a person's interest and/or skill in a certain area may be traced to a specific forbear; Berliner noted, for example, that *mbira* playing is often interpreted as the expression of the 'long-dormant talent of an ancestor who was himself a skilled player' (1978, 137).

Additionally, some *mbira* players are mediums or *homwe* (literally, 'pocket') for ancestral *vadzimu* spirits, and may be called to *mbira* by the spirit. The situation can

become quite complex, as an individual medium may be host to more than one spirit (which could be of the same or different types) which possess her at different times or even in succession. Women and men alike may become spirit mediums, and a medium can be possessed by a *mudzimu* or *shave* spirit of either gender (or none, in the case of some *mashave*). Note that the *vadzimu* spirits do not (in theory) discriminate between men and women in choosing mediums; nor do the *mashave* refrain from bestowing *mbira* playing or other talents on persons of either gender. It is not uncommon for a woman *homwe* (like Beauler Dyoko) to be possessed by the spirit of a male ancestor, possibly the ranking authority in the patrilineage. In such a case she is possessed of a status and authority seemingly inaccessible to her outside the ceremonial context.¹⁵ A *gwenyambira* who is a medium for a male ancestral spirit gains further esteem and status while in the possessed state.

Can a white American woman have a spiritual calling to play Shona *mbira*? My own involvement with Shona music began in Seattle in 1976 when I attended a Zimbabwean dance-concert featuring Dumisani ‘Dumi’ Maraire¹⁶ and his marimba band, an encounter which changed my life. I had never heard of *mbira* until I began studying with Dumi (on marimba and then *nyunga nyunga mbira*), and I was immediately hooked, entranced by the polyrhythmic layers and the seemingly infinite depth of the music. On my initial visit to Zimbabwe in 1980–81, I met veteran *gwenyambira* Mondrek Muchena, who became my first *mbira dzavadzimu* teacher. Baba (‘Father’/Mr) Muchena was proud to be teaching a white American (I was, however, preceded by Paul Berliner and one or two others) and I experienced no barriers being a woman. My roles as a white American student/researcher/performer of *mbira* were often outside Shona gender categories, rendering me exempt from most gendered expectations.

In the late 1980s, living in Harare, I became close friends and part of the family with Mondrek and his wife (and *hosho* player) Francesca Muchena. As a member of their semi-professional *mbira* group Mhuri Yekwa Muchena, I attended and performed *mbira* in numerous *mapira* and other traditional Shona ceremonies. Many Zimbabweans who heard Mhuri Yekwa Muchena were surprised and full of wonder to see a white woman playing *mbira*, and frequently asked if I had a spirit. My usual answer was ‘No, I don’t know anything about that, I just love the music’. Upon hearing my response, Baba Muchena chided me for forgetting what he had told me about *mbira* and *mashave* spirits. The explanation for my *mbira* playing, he insisted, was the spirit that ‘doesn’t come out’—*shave risinga budi*.

The Muchenas cautioned me not to wear anything red at *mapira* possession ceremonies—because ‘some spirits don’t want to see the colour red’. Red represents blood; to the Korekore sub-group of the Shona, it symbolizes biological life—the blood of birth and of menstruation—which is associated with women and antithetical to the royal *mhondoro* spirits (Lan 1985, 91–7). As ancestors of (patriarchal) chiefs, most *mhondoro* spirits are male, and they possess only mediums of the same sex. Blood is so dangerous to them that it is believed the mediums could die if exposed to anything red. The Korekore exclude pre-menopausal women from

actively participating in *mhondoro* possession rituals or brewing beer for them (ibid., 94–5), and some other Shona groups prohibit menstruating women from attending *mapira* ceremonies for *vadzimu* spirits as well.¹⁷ It is possible that these taboos have served to discourage or prohibit women from playing *mbira*.

According to well-known *gwenyambira* and traditional dancer Irene Chigamba (b. 1957), the blood taboo applies to any type of spiritual ceremony. She believes women should refrain from playing *mbira* when menstruating: ‘When you are at month period they said you don’t touch *mbira*, you don’t touch things for *mudzimu* . . . *Wakasviba*, that is to say, you are dirty’ (Chigamba interview 1999).¹⁸ Neither Mondrek nor Amai Muchena communicated such stringent prohibitions to me. Nevertheless, I only had my menstrual period at a ceremony once, at the second *bira* I ever attended in 1985, shortly before I learned of the blood taboos. For the remainder of the five years I performed with Mhuri Yekwa Muchena—at least one or two *mapira* a month—I never again had my period during a ceremony. Either it began after a ceremony (sometimes late) or was finished before the event took place. This occurrence has always been remarkable to me, quite inexplicable in my American frame of reference. The explanation was quite clear to Irene Chigamba, though; when I related my story to her, she exclaimed ‘You see, it was your spirit that made it happen like that!’

Irene emphasizes the role of the *maskave* for some *mbira* players: ‘Those [who] say they don’t have the spirit, they don’t know they have the spirit; that’s why they are playing *mbira*. Because they are not possessed so they thought “ah I don’t have anything”—but they have the spirit!’ (Chigamba interview 1999). Like Benita Tarupiwa, Irene Chigamba grew up in a *mbira*-playing family and has played since she was 8. Her father, Tute Chigamba, is a self-taught *mbira* maker and player, highly respected within the *mbira* community. Her mother, now deceased, was a spirit medium who began playing when Irene (the eldest child) was very young. Irene acknowledged to me that her own spirit is a man who played *mbira* during his lifetime. She explained why *mbira* ‘is for everyone’: ‘If I am a man, if I died playing *mbira*, I can also possess to a woman . . . So she can also play *mbira*’ (ibid).

***Mbira* and Gendered Resistance**

What of the notion that a woman must have a spirit in order to play *mbira*—is this indicative of gender bias underlying the seeming acceptance of female *gwenyambira*? Benita Tarupiwa, for one, was generally less inclined than the other women players I interviewed to attribute *mbira* playing to the actions or presence of spirits. She looked askance at claims that a woman must be possessed by a male spirit in order to play: ‘I don’t take it seriously because I know that people always have something to say when they come across somebody doing something [they disapprove of]’ (interview 2000). When I asked her about the spirit that ‘doesn’t come out’, Benita replied, ‘I don’t know much about explaining something like that’, and questioned rhetorically, ‘Isn’t it the same thing like when I am a netball player, if I really feel like I am really

interested when I am playing netball, does that mean that netball has brought my spirit?' (ibid).

Less traditionalist than the older women players, Benita's perspective suggests a generational difference regarding the association of *mbira* with Shona spirituality. Although she learned from and played *mbira* with her family, Benita also performed in educational and secular contexts while growing up. Her primary and secondary schooling took place after Zimbabwe achieved majority rule in 1980, when many educators had begun to encourage the teaching and performance of traditional music and dance (Jones 2006, 191–2). Benita had the opportunity to play *mbira* in extramural music clubs and participate in school-sponsored traditional music competitions—the first of which she won when she was in grade one (i.e., around age 6; Tarupiwa interview 2000). None of the older women played at school; in fact *mbira*, as 'the devil's music', was incompatible with Western education in their day.¹⁹

Demonization of *mbira* music in Zimbabwe dates from the mid-1800s arrival of Christian missionaries, who discouraged the music associated with traditional religion and the 'pagan' practices of spirit possession. Large numbers of Africans began to convert to Christianity following the colonial occupation (1890) and subsequent introduction of formal education in what was then known as Southern Rhodesia, and many of the mission-educated rejected traditional religion and music. Missionary approaches towards indigenous cultural practices gradually shifted, however, from total rejection to tolerance and, by the late 1950s, the institution of music indigenization programmes in the churches (Axelsson 1974). The transformations in Christian attitudes contributed to the increased acceptance of *mbira* music (on the part of missionaries as well as their converts).²⁰ Nevertheless, for some, Christian opposition was—and still is—a substantial deterrent, and may reinforce gendered resistance to women playing *mbira*.²¹ Stella Chiweshe, for example, relates that her first husband, a black Zimbabwean, initially objected to her playing on religious grounds: 'Because where I grew up [near St. Michael's Mission in Mhondoro] people who played *mbira*, *ngoma*, *hosho*, were people of Satan . . . we were told as children to run away from those people, that they were doing something that is uncivilized' (Chiweshe interview 2000).

The colonial Rhodesia radio and record companies began to broadcast and disseminate *mbira* and other indigenous musics during the late 1950s to early 1960s (Turino 1998), the same era in which the mainstream churches were liberalizing their practices. It did not take long thereafter for women players—Beauler Dyoko, followed by Stella Chiweshe—to emerge publicly alongside men. I have found it difficult to determine whether many women were playing *mbira* before this time; not surprisingly, oral accounts contradict one another. Some Zimbabweans claim that the instruments were played only by men while others maintain that women were free to play, but (for example) were too busy with women's work. Given that the *mbira*-enabling spirits may possess individuals of either sex, I cannot believe there were no Shona women 60 or even 200 years ago as determined to play *mbira* and as strong as today's female musicians in resisting accustomed gender roles.

A passing comment in an ethnographic work by Dr Michael Gelfand—the earliest written reference I have found—suggests that women *mbira* players were not unknown or even rare in the mid-twentieth century.²² In a discussion of women healers possessed by *mashave*, Gelfand observed that a *n'anga* 'may play a *mbira* or some other musical instrument to please her *shave* and induce it to enter her' (1959, 108). Zimbabwean township music researcher Joyce Jenje-Makwenda maintains that 'Shona culture did not exclude women from playing the *mbira* . . . But during colonisation and the advent of Christianity in Africa with their impact on Shona customs, it was decided that women should never play the *mbira*' (2001). The core of Jenje-Makwenda's assertion may ultimately be borne out, but is weakened by the sweeping generalization and lack of any referents. Exactly who 'decided that women should never play?' Missionaries and/or colonial authorities? Shona patriarchs? Perhaps (most likely, I would suggest), the interests of both parties reinforced each other in creating new expectations and restrictions for African women.

Today a number of younger women are picking up *mbira*, but they remain in the minority in a performance arena long dominated by male specialists. While the women players I have spoken to report varying degrees of encouragement and resistance from their immediate families, none can escape the gendered expectations of the larger society. Stella Chiweshe recalls the types of comments people made when she was learning in the 1960s: '*Mbira* is only played by men, and she wants to play . . . If a person is like that you know she's really loose, she wants to be with men always, that is why she wants to play *mbira*' (interview 2000). Irene Chigamba reports the common admonition that a woman playing *mbira* will not be able to do woman's work: 'She will not be able to cook *sadza* [maize-meal porridge]; she will burn all the food' (Chigamba interview 1999). Remarks of this sort convey not-so-subtle messages about appropriate behaviour; women who play *mbira* are seen as lacking in proper and chaste womanhood.

Stella and Irene both report that they initially encountered scepticism over their *mbira* playing, but once they were heard to perform, the disbelief turned to appreciation for their abilities. In ritual contexts *mbira* players are respected for their closeness to the spirits. Their special role in the possession ceremony is unaffected by the player's gender, states Irene: 'Women *gwenyambira*, men *gwenyambira*, we do the same. Yes, we do the same job'.

Irene Chigamba also pointed out that her mother met with more resistance to her *mbira* playing than she did. Men of her mother's generation who didn't want to see women playing *mbira* claimed, 'It's not allowed by the ancestors'. They 'were telling lies', Irene declared, 'so that women would be afraid to touch the *mbira*' and their husbands would forbid it. Recourse to the ancestors, the ultimate authority in Shona culture, acts to legitimize self-serving discourses of 'tradition' and 'culture'. As Irene understands very well, such gendered interpretations serve to perpetuate male hegemony in Zimbabwean society—but as re-constructions of tradition, they may be challenged and negotiated anew.

Mbira, Cultural Nationalism and Gender

The years leading up to and spanning Zimbabwe's war of liberation (1966–80) were a time of intensifying political and cultural nationalism, and the *mbira dzavadzimu* gradually gained currency as a symbol of cultural pride. In the early 1960s, nationalist rallies encouraging the embracing of African cultural heritage and identification with the future nation presented a variety of traditional (and modern) dance/drum styles, including performances of the Zezuru *mbira* (Turino 2000, 177–82). These mass displays of cultural nationalism became impossible after the white Rhodesian government unilaterally proclaimed the colony's independence from Britain in 1965 and banned the nationalist parties, forcing them to operate underground. By the late 1970s, guerrillas and commercial musicians alike were deploying music as protest against the Rhodesian regime. The music that arose out of and helped to fuel the struggle became known as *chimurenga* ('struggle') music.²³ Guitar-band musicians, most notably Thomas Mapfumo, sang politically charged Shona lyrics backed by electric guitars and drum kit, emulating *mbira* music and other traditional genres (Turino 2000, 268ff). The new popular styles were widely interpreted as an affirmation of cultural heritage, and the subtle messages of resistance, disguised to circumvent Rhodesian censorship, helped mobilize support for the liberation struggle.

As a significant expression of cultural nationalism, Shona religious practices also became a target of state harassment during the war. Government authorities attempted to control urban religious activities by monitoring people's movements and requiring written permission for all-night possession ceremonies to be held.²⁴ Ambuya Beauler recalled: 'Now in 1967 the war it was starting, they didn't want us to play *mbira*; they said these people playing *mbira* are giving the guerrillas strength. Then in 1980 everything was okay because it was now [independent] Zimbabwe' (interview 2001). Irene Chigamba related to me a harrowing tale of travelling with her mother to Chiweshe Reserve (her mother's birthplace) in 1975 to play *mbira* for the comrades (guerrillas) there. There were many roadblocks on the way, but her mother's spirit advised them to travel by car, rather than bus, and they were not stopped by the police. According to Irene, it was the first time the comrades had seen women playing *mbira*, and their commander said, 'Oh, this shows us that you are going to win the country because you are now seeing something you've never seen before. A mother and daughter, playing *mbira* for you. It's something new, something . . . mysterious' (Chigamba interview 1999).

The Rhodesian government had good reason to be wary of the political power of Shona religious beliefs and practitioners. In 1896–7 two mediums possessed by *mhondoro* spirits—Nehanda (female) and Kagubi (male)—helped to inspire and lead the Mashonaland rebellion against the British that has become known as the First Chimurenga (for accounts of the rebellion, see Beach 1986; Ranger 1967). The uprising was crushed and the leaders hanged, but Ambuya Nehanda's legacy in particular has endured as a symbol of resistance. Later, during the fight against

colonial rule—hailed as the Second Chimurenga—both the Rhodesian regime and the liberation armies were well aware of the influence of the *mhondoro* spirits. The creation of alliances with the mediums in order to gain the support of the rural populace was a key nationalist strategy (Fry 1976; Lan 1985; Ranger 1985). In the early 1970s, a medium of Nehanda once again inspired the liberation struggle by sanctioning and assisting the activities of the guerrillas in northeast Zimbabwe (Lan 1985, 3–7). Ambuya Nehanda has become an iconic figure as a spiritual ‘Mother of the Nation’. More than one *chimurenga* song invoked her spirit during and after the war, and she frequently appears in Zimbabwean poetry and literature (e.g., the 1994 novel *Nehanda* by Yvonne Vera). Indicative of her official incorporation as a national icon²⁵ is the statue of Nehanda installed in the Zimbabwean Parliament building.

Cultural nationalism was at its peak in the post-independence euphoria of the early 1980s, and the Zimbabwean National Dance Company (NDC, established 1981) was the showcase for the state-sponsored promotion of traditional music and dance. The full-time salaried troupe initially consisted of a group of expert dancers of several different regional dance styles, a choral director and a *mbira* player (Turino 2000, 322). *Mbira dzavadzimu* was the sole featured instrument besides the drums and rattles needed to accompany most of the dances. One of the first NDC productions to tour internationally was a musical play called *Mbuya Nehanda*, depicting the history of the liberation struggles of 1896 and the just-ended war. Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner described the play as an unequivocal nationalist narrative ‘meant to identify the new nation of Zimbabwe through its history of struggle and through its culture’ (1994, 132–3). Featured in the title role of the rebellious spirit medium was original NDC member, *gwenyambira* Stella Chiweshe.

The association of Chiweshe with the image of Ambuya Nehanda (and vice versa) is no coincidence. Nehanda has become the archetype for popular images and ideas that position women in the past as bearers of tradition and symbols of cultural and national pride. These gendered symbolisms come with built-in limitations and boundaries, however; as Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner note, male-dominated nationalisms in Zimbabwe have historically represented women ‘as icons but rarely as active and self-defining agents’ (1994, 112). Even the dynamic figure of Nehanda—a spirit medium—paradoxically derives her authority and agency from a long-ago ancestor.²⁶ Women performers are seen to deviate from the archetypal ideals when they attempt to define their own public personae. Women *mbira* players, with their spiritual connections and the cumulative symbolic weight of the instrument, may have particular difficulty escaping ready-made nationalist representations as ‘voices of the past’. Those who strive to cross over into the commercial music industry must battle another stereotype: that of the loose woman or prostitute.

***Mbira*, Gender and the Popular Music Industry**

In Zimbabwe, the popular music industry is primarily an urban phenomenon, and it has been described by Angela Impey as a ‘dangerous’ cultural space for women (1992,

16ff). To understand why, one must recognize that the Rhodesian towns and cities developed as gendered spaces. The institution of wage labour rapidly followed the 1890 colonial invasion, but early twentieth-century colonists allowed only native men—not women—official access to employment and residence in the growing towns to ensure that their settlements would remain white enclaves. This arrangement served the interests of indigenous patriarchs as well, as it was advantageous for husbands and fathers to keep their wives and daughters at home to tend the crops and maintain claims to land. More importantly, women who stayed in the rural areas remained under the social and economic control of male relatives. Denied a place in urban social and productive realms, women who did migrate to the cities had to make their own way. Many were looked upon as socially deviant, and their sexuality was disparaged.

By the 1930s, both African men and the colonial administration were publicly deploring the behaviour of urban women as ‘immoral’; a discourse of ‘respectability’ had taken root (Jeater 1993, 236–9). Unmarried women were branded as prostitutes or *mahure* (from the English word ‘whore’) whether or not they were engaged in sex work. Representations of urban women as ‘immoral’ and ‘dangerous’ have persisted since the colonial era and are ubiquitous in indigenous-language literature (Gaidzanwa 1985) as well as song texts (Ntarangwi 1999). These labels are still used to describe women who attempt to move into public spaces and strive for economic power and independence (Gaidzanwa 1985, 79). Occasional sweeps made by the Zimbabwe National Police are indicative of the deep-seated nature of the negative images of urban women, as well as the state’s ambivalent policies towards women. In 1983, during the first post-independence campaign to rid the city of prostitutes and beggars, Harare police arrested 6000 women. Many of these women were not prostitutes; their only crime was walking unaccompanied on city streets. More than 20 years on, public maligning of independent urban women persists, and it remains difficult for women to walk freely in Harare without verbal abuse or unsolicited comments (Mashiri 2000).

The urbanization and social changes brought about during the colonial period also facilitated the growth of music as a profession (Turino 2000). Women were actively involved in creating new forms of entertainment in the townships and cities from the outset in the 1930s, when popular music and jazz scenes began to flourish in Harare and Bulawayo. Regionally based music societies, the forerunners of contemporary folkloric troupes, formed in the townships to present traditional music and dance (including *mbira*) disconnected from indigenous cultural context (Vambe 1976, 212). The urban environments also contributed to the institution of European-style concert performance. ‘Concert’ music performers, all the rage among the middle class from the late 1930s to early 1960s (Turino 2000, 125–39), lent an aura of middle-class ‘respectability’ to the budding music industry, in contrast to the unsavoury reputations of many itinerant soloists and township musicians. Representations of musicians as unreliable drunkards and sexually promiscuous individuals are not as

negative as they once were, but they remain especially troublesome for aspiring women musicians.

The political importance of music during the struggle was crucial to the entry of *mbira* into the Zimbabwean popular music industry—and the popular imagination. In the mid-1980s, bands led by Thomas Mapfumo and Stella Chiweshe started combining *mbira dzavadzimu* with Western instrumentation, and other musicians have followed suit. The genre of electric *mbira*-style guitar has endured in the years since as a popular traditional style. During the same decade the National Dance Company was promoting the commercialization of traditional dance and *mbira* music. Although the NDC was disbanded in 1991 (a casualty of budget cutbacks), it provided a model for later professional dance troupes (Turino 2000, 326–8). Irene Chigamba was an early NDC member who, like Stella Chiweshe, used her training and touring experience with the state company as a springboard to a professional career. Irene trained and led the *mbira* and dance troupe Mhembero ('Celebration'), which became the most popular and successful of several such folkloric groups through the 1990s (Jones 2006, 335). Popular musicians had paved the way for performers of indigenous genres to imagine that they too could make a living with music, and *mbira* had taken its place alongside Western instruments onstage. All these factors have led an increasing number of *mbira* players, including women, to venture into the commercial music industry since independence.

The gendered social constraints and disparagement of women's sexuality that persist in Zimbabwe are overtly reflected in the music industry. 'The reinvention of what is "traditionally" or morally appropriate behaviour on the part of women,' observes Angela Impey, 'appears to be a convenient ideology recalled to both lessen the competition within the industry . . . and to ensure the ongoing control of men in the society' (1992, 121–2). Nightclubs, bars and beer gardens, the customary venues for consumption of live music in the towns and cities, are typically crowded with men and characterized by drunkenness and sexual promiscuity—places 'respectable' women avoid. Any woman who would attempt to earn her living as a musician must transgress social boundaries and culture-specific gender roles in order to operate within the male-dominated arena.

Though it might seem that their associations with spirits would protect women *gwenyambira* from sexual aspersions, they nevertheless face the same attitudes and barriers as other women in the music industry. The respect engendered by possession or a spiritual calling to music does not necessarily extend from the ceremonial context to secular arenas. On this point I disagree with Impey, who wrote that since women *mbira* players are believed to be called on by higher spiritual powers they 'can therefore not be challenged by the community' and are 'exempt from the [usual] sexual slurs' (1992, 129–30). While Ambuya Beauler and Ambuya Stella are now generally respected as pioneers within the industry, younger women who have not yet established themselves struggle for acceptance. In Benita Tarupiwa's experience, women *mbira* players get no more respect than dancers or singers: 'I think it's because most people who are band members are not married, so people don't respect us for

that fact . . . mostly people think that anyone who is not married is a prostitute' (Tarupiwa interview 2000). Furthermore, women musicians report that they are not only criticized for being *mahure*, but are expected to be *mahure*. Benita said, 'Male booking managers expect you to sleep with them in order to get shows. That's why I mostly don't play [in clubs], because I can't work with my body. I have to respect myself' (ibid.).

In reality, it is not any easier for 'respectable' married women to perform in public. Women musicians consistently cite the incompatibility of marriage with a music career. Many husbands object to their wives' pursuing music as a profession, suspicious of an occupation which may entail entertaining other men in bars at night. Benita became a professional upon leaving school and was accepted as a *gwenyambira* within her family and rural home area, but encountered resistance as a married woman in Harare. Her husband acted in indirect ways to prevent her from performing in public; the situation eventually became intolerable for her and she left the marriage. Other women musicians are also eschewing marriage. According to Irene Chigamba, 'That's why now it is common for women to play *mbira*, because some decided to be unmarried. Because if I love to play *mbira*, [and] if I have a hard time with my husband, it's better to stay alone' (interview 1999).

Women *mbira* players encounter fiercer exclusion the further they attempt to move outside the sanctioned space of the home and family. Some adopt the strategy of moving out of Zimbabwean space to seek acceptance and success. Stella Chiweshe, for example, is married to a German and her performance and recording career is centred in Europe. She continues to perform *mbira dzavadzimu* in the traditional style, but also combines *mbira* with electric guitars and marimbas in her band. Yet the 'Queen of *Mbira*' was marginalized within Zimbabwe until she received international acclaim. During the early 1990s, Chiweshe was seldom offered the best-known performance venues in Harare and her recordings were dismissed as 'music for the archives' by local promoters (Impey 1992, 120). By 2000, however, she enjoyed the same public welcome upon her return to the country as Thomas Mapfumo (by far the most popular foreign-based Zimbabwean musician). Ironically, her gender has worked in her favour in Europe and North America, where 'taboo-breaking' is a commercial asset. Ambuya Chiweshe now receives the local recognition she is due as a valued cultural ambassador.

***Pamberi Nechinyakare* ('Forward with the Past')**

Several *mbira* groups were performing regularly in Harare's commercial music scene in Zimbabwe during 2006. This was a remarkable achievement in the context of a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic and the failing economy—80% unemployment, chronic shortages of petrol and foodstuffs, and the highest inflation rate in the world. As for women *mbira* players, it seems the torch has passed to the younger generation. Ambuya Beauler Dyoko's major concern in recent years has been raising an extended family of nieces and nephews orphaned by AIDS; income from several American

tours in this decade has helped to support them. Benita Tarupiwa, who performed with several bands in the mid-1990s, now frequently appears with her own *mbira* ensemble at events and nightclubs where Ambuya Beauler used to play. Like Ambuya, Benita frequently composes her own lyrics to traditional *mbira* pieces. She does not hesitate to comment on gender relations, for example, criticizing the ‘empty promises’ of a cheating husband in her well-known song *Gara ndichauya* (‘Stay, I will come’; from Tarupiwa 1997).

But the individual woman most strongly identified with *mbira* by Zimbabwean popular music fans today is a 32-year-old who grew up in the United States and does not practice the traditional religion: Chiwoniso Maraire (b. 1976), daughter of Dumisani Maraire, my first teacher of Shona music. ‘Chi’, as she is affectionately known, spent much of her childhood in Seattle where Dumi was teaching, performing and studying. She absorbed her father’s passion for Zimbabwean music and learned the 15-key *nyunga nyunga mbira* from him. Chi began her own professional career in the early 1990s in Zimbabwe with A Peace of Ebony, a rap group combining *mbira* and house-influenced hip hop. Her current band Vibe Culture includes a *mbira dzavadzimu* player with electric upright bass and traditional gourd rattles and drum backing her *nyunga nyunga mbira* and vocals. Chiwoniso’s music varies from the ancestral *mbira* repertoire to blues, jazz, rap and reggae fusions with modern pop instrumentations. Blessed with a voice of remarkable range and expressivity, she sings in both chiShona and English, dealing with a variety of themes. In 2005, her song ‘Rebel Woman’, with revolutionary lyrics inspired by an Ethiopian/Eritrean poem (from her 2004 CD *Timeless*), earned second place in the World Music category of Nashville’s International Songwriting Competition. Chiwoniso clearly embraces her cultural hybridity as a modern Zimbabwean woman and as such represents a major departure from the iconic figure of Ambuya Nehanda.

Each of the women *mbira* players has had to carve out her public identity and space within (or against) the confines of national and cultural stereotypes. It is ironic that as women unequivocally associated with the past and the ways of the ancestors, *mbira* players like Stella Chiweshe and Beauler Dyoko were at first marginalized within the very musical tradition they champion. But the question must be raised: is it not ultimately limiting to glorify the past in the terms of modernist discourse? Chitauro, Dube, and Gunner wrote of Stella Chiweshe that ‘she may not be able to move outside what is a confining cultural nationalism Can she move away from the powerful and animating shadow of Nehanda? Does she need to?’ (1994, 134).

What has facilitated success for Ambuya Stella in Europe, or was necessary for Ambuya Beauler to gain acceptance as a recording pioneer 40 years ago, may be passé to many twenty-first-century Zimbabweans. For professional musicians of the post-independence generation, *mbira* is becoming increasingly dissociated from traditional Shona religion and spirit mediumship. This is especially true for Chiwoniso Maraire and Vibe Culture and their youthful cosmopolitan audience. Yet many urbanites resist being pigeon-holed into oppositional ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ categories, instead forging new identities from elements of both (see, for example, Neate’s 1994

ethnography of a group of Harare ‘homeboys’). Chi herself defends *mbira* music from Christian detractors who decry its links with spirit possession, emphasizing a personal spirituality with universal meaning: ‘In the true sense of spirituality when they say that an instrument is spiritual, in my knowledge it basically means that this instrument has the ability to touch your spirit’ (Chiwoniso Maraire, quoted in Jenje-Makwenda 2001).

Despite the changing times, a significant proportion of the Zimbabwean population still practices the traditional ways and looks to the ancestors for guidance. The achievements of Beauler Dyoko continue to inspire, and her ancestral wisdom remains widely relevant. Ambuya’s 1995 cassette liner notes include a message to her fans: ‘*Pamberi Nechinyakare*’ (‘Forward with the Past/Tradition’). Evocative of Zimbabwean political slogans,²⁷ her multi-layered exhortation points up the ironies of notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘the past’ and their ongoing valence in post-colonial Zimbabwean society. Ambuya Beauler asserted a future for the past whilst promoting traditional music and the modernity of her band (*mbira* combined with electric guitars). We might ask: whose past? Who is entitled to define the past? In a society in which some people still maintain that it is not part of their culture for women to play music, Ambuya staked her claim to define both the past and the future through music-making, and in so doing reclaimed the *mbira* tradition for all. *Pamberi Nechinyakare!* Forward with the Past!

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Notes

- [1] Ambuya (also Mbuya; chiShona) is a female honorific title variously meaning grandmother, midwife, paternal aunt or mother-in-law. It is commonly used to show respect to an older woman whether or not she has borne any children. Non-English language terms cited here are chiShona.
- [2] The chiShona language is actually a cluster of mutually intelligible dialects spoken by several closely related groups which include the Zezuru, Karanga, Korekore, Manyika, Kalanga and Ndau. Shona-speakers comprise a 75% majority out of a total Zimbabwean population of approximately 13 million.
- [3] As of this writing, an image of a *mbira* appears on the official Zimbabwean government website (see <http://www.gta.gov.zw/>) right underneath a photograph of the President Robert Mugabe, a virtual declaration of the importance of the instrument to the idea of the

Zimbabwean nation. See Turino 1998 on the *mbira's* transformation from a local to world tradition.

- [4] My attraction for Shona *mbira* music led me to move to Harare in 1985, where I was employed as a secondary teacher by the Ministry of Education until 1990. I spent an additional 14 months there from 1999 to 2000 carrying out research for my doctoral dissertation (Jones 2006); many of the interviews for this article were carried out at that time.
- [5] The term 'genderist' is preferred (to 'feminist') by some of the contributors to the Moaisala and Diamond collection (2000, 18).
- [6] I follow here the chiShona usage of the term '*mbira*' in both the singular and the plural to refer to the instruments as well as, generically, to the family of related instruments. ChiShona-speakers also use the term '*mbira*' to refer to the music or an event where *mbira* music is played.
- [7] These observations draw on several previous works; in addition to Berliner 1978, see Tracey 1969 on the *mbira* class of instruments and Tracey 1972 on relationships between the instruments.
- [8] This *mbira*, originally from the Nyungwe region of Mozambique (see Tracey 1961), was a core teaching instrument at the Kwanongoma College of Music where Zimbabwean educator/ethnomusicologist Dumisani Maraire studied. The origin of the name *nyunga nyunga* is a matter of debate; Maraire popularized the term in over 30 years of teaching in the US and Zimbabwe.
- [9] Also called *nhare* (iron), *mbira huru* (large *mbira*) or simply '*mbira*' by those who play it. I will use the term *mbira dzavadzimu* when referring specifically to the Zezuru *mbira*.
- [10] *Mhondoro* are the spirits of individuals who lived (or are believed to have lived) many generations ago, 'the original owners of the land' (Lan 1985, 32). As ancestors of chiefs, the *mhondoro* are responsible for the welfare of entire clans; they participate in decisions regarding chiefly succession and have the power to bring or withhold rain.
- [11] Among the Ndebele of southwestern Zimbabwe, however, at least one drum genre is the province of women. As for recently introduced instruments, relatively few African women have taken up Western orchestral instruments (although as of 2000, the Zimbabwe College of Music in Harare was offering music scholarships to women in an attempt to correct gender imbalances). An increasing number of schoolgirls play the modern Zimbabwean marimba, but they seldom continue into adulthood; see Jones 2006, 285–8. Women guitarists and other instrumentalists attempting to enter the commercial music industry typically face the obstacles discussed in the second half of this article. See Jones 1992 for more information on musical instruments in Zimbabwe.
- [12] 'Nhemamusasa', literally, 'Cutting trees for a temporary shelter,' is considered to be one of the most ancient songs in the *mbira dzavadzimu* repertoire; it was also the first song Ambuya Beauler recorded. Many *mbira* players attribute their knowledge of *mbira* pieces to dreams; see Berliner 1978, 136–8, who adds, 'it is prestigious for a *mbira* player to have been taught in dreams by spirits' with the result that such claims are often regarded with scepticism.
- [13] Whether or not the status of Shona women has declined since pre-colonial times is a much-debated issue, but outside the scope of this article. See Cawthorne 1999, 57–8 on the terms of the debate, and consult Schmidt 1992 for an analysis of the roles of women during the early colonial era in Zimbabwe (1870–1939); she argues that African and European patriarchal structures reinforced each other, resulting in new forms of oppression.
- [14] See Bucher 1980 for a more extensive discussion of Shona spirits and cosmology.
- [15] I examine the gendered meanings of the roles of Shona women spirit mediums for the individual and the society in an unpublished paper, in which I argue that meanings for possession within a given social structure are generally more concerned with fundamental questions of identity, selfhood and personal power than they are with institutional power structures (Jones 1996; but see Fry 1976 and Lan 1985 on expressions of political power by

- Shona mediums). I suggest that, for women *vadzimu* mediums, the enactment and construction of powerful personalities through possession rituals may be empowering in the secular realm as well.
- [16] Abraham Dumisani Maraire (1944–99) first came to the United States as a visiting artist in the University of Washington ethnomusicology division in 1968, and taught Shona music in Seattle for more than 20 years. Maraire, who completed his PhD in ethnomusicology in 1990, pioneered the introduction of Zimbabwean marimba and *mbira* in the United States and inspired countless Americans with his music and teaching.
- [17] Note that the gender regime is very different for the various types of Shona spirits, and they do not follow the same prohibitions. For example, Lan writes of certain hunting spirits (*mashave rekuvhima*) whose mediums, in opposition to the *mhondoro*, embrace blood and wear red beads in possession rituals (1985, 160). I have never heard of any blood taboos concerning *mashave* mediums in Mashonaland, many of whom are women and wear red ceremonial cloth.
- [18] Similarly, Jenje-Makwenda has written that Shona women were excluded from playing the *mbira* in sacred ceremonies ‘when women were menstruating, when they are considered to be unclean...’ (2001). I suggest, following Marla Powers (1980, 56) that the notion that menstruating women are ‘unclean’ or ‘dirty’ is likely a Western- or Christian-influenced idea, unlike the Korekore concept of menstrual blood as ‘dangerous’.
- [19] The same is true, of course, for older male *mbira* players; see, for example, the biographical sketches in Berliner 1978, 207–33.
- [20] The spread of nationalism among black Africans and a white liberal discourse of racial partnership during the Federation era of 1953–63 also contributed to greater public receptivity towards *mbira* and other indigenous musics; see Turino 1998 on the *mbira* trajectory.
- [21] The teachings of the early missionaries have had a long-lasting impact, and many Zimbabweans have internalized negative views of their heritage. Furthermore, the dramatic growth of evangelical and Pentecostal churches from the 1990s on has led to a resurgence of anti-traditionalism in Zimbabwe. Demonizing attitudes towards indigenous African spirituality and music are now espoused more by Zimbabwean Christians and independent black sects than by European missionaries and churches: see Jones 2006, 165–70; Maxwell 1998.
- [22] Gelfand, a medical doctor, published a large number of works on Shona culture and religion from the 1950s to the 1970s. One of his principal informants was Muchatera Mujuru, a (male) *mbira* player and medium who claimed to be possessed by Chaminuka, a revered *mhondoro* spirit.
- [23] *Chimurenga* music has been well documented, but is often misrepresented in the popular Western press as the invention of a single heroic individual. See Pongweni 1982 and Turino 2000 on the wartime meanings and diversity of *chimurenga* music during the struggle.
- [24] Reported to me by numerous *mbira* players who were active during the war, including Mondrek Muchena; also Irene Chigamba (interview 1999). Paul Berliner was discreet in what he wrote in *The Soul of Mbira* as the war was still going on at the time of its publication (personal communication 1997). He did however refer to the harassment of *mbira* players: ‘Because of the support that African nationalist guerrillas have received in recent years from important traditional religious figures in certain parts of Zimbabwe, some *mbira* players are said to have been victims of harassment for their association with these figures and for their role at Shona rituals. As early as 1973, I received unconfirmed reports of performers in northern Zimbabwe who were fined or arrested for their performance of *mbira* music’ (1978, 245).

- [25] The representation of Ambuya Nehanda as a national icon by Shona-dominated state institutions can be read as an example of the conflation of 'Shona' with 'Zimbabwean' national identity (see also Ranger 1993, 100).
- [26] Lan also comments on the paradoxical agency of Shona mediumship: 'The medium is at once passive vessel and dynamo, originating and challenging but never in his [sic] own name or his own person' (1985, 66).
- [27] Slogans popular during and after Zimbabwe's independence war include 'Pamberi *Nechimurenga*' ('Forward with the Struggle') and 'Pamberi *NeZANU (PF)*' ('Forward with ZANU (PF)' [the ruling party]). To get an idea of the impact of Ambuya's slogan, imagine 'Forward with the Past' chanted antiphonally with raised fists.

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