

# Patriarchy challenged by dreams

Ancestors open doors for Zimbabwean women musicians



Imbongi Elizabeth Ncube

Zimbabwean women traditional-popular musicians have made a name for themselves in the world of music, despite "modern" patriarchal Zimbabwean society. Patriarchal structures have made it difficult for women to enjoy cultural space and create their own niche. But women traditional-popular musicians have made great strides and are ambassadors of Zimbabwean music to the world.

Dream ancestors have played an

The mbira is traditionally played by men in Zimbabwean Shona culture. **Joyce Jenje Makwenda**, however, traces the emergence of highly talented women players who have overcome obstacles through their dream ancestors.

important role in enabling women to take this space. It is important to understand the mystique that surrounds gender and patriarchy in traditional-popular music, especially gender and spiritual beliefs.

Traditional instruments and performance has been surrounded by myths that exclude women. The spirituality and sacredness of traditional instruments and performance has been used as a way to stop women from participating in traditional music because they are supposedly unclean. However, calling on the authority of spirituality backfires when a woman is called by the ancestors.

The excuse of lack of purity is undermined by messages coming from the spirits who suggest that they want women to play *mbira*. This opens a terrain of struggle between the spirit world and earthly patriarchal society. Women musicians have overcome patriarchal rule using the strength that comes from the spirit world. The ancestors have provided an open door for some women.

Women have entered traditional-popular music using various channels and guides. Dreams have been a particularly strong force of inspiration that has pulled women towards traditional performance in opposition to human patriarchal

rule that has tried to stop them. Dreams are a strong force in the spiritual world as they are one of the ways ancestors communicate with the living.

According to Veit Erlman, a renowned international ethnomusicologist, music is a product of ancestors communicating through dreams to those whom they choose. In 1988, Ambuya Rena Chitombo at the age of 83 was still active in music. She would make sure that when going to bed she had a book and pen under the pillow as most of her songs came through dreams. She said, "Dreams are very powerful because that is the way one communicates with the spiritual world."

In Zimbabwe, ancestors who call women traditional musicians through dreams want to continue the tradition of music they played while they were in the human world. This is true in Shona and Ndebele culture, but Zulu culture in South Africa also passes music to the living through dreams. Joseph Shabalala, who is known world over for his *isicathamiya*, believes that all dreams are encounters with the ancestors.

## RISE OF WOMEN MBIRA PLAYERS

It was dreams that allowed the first



Irene Chigamba



Chiwoniso Maraire

woman in recent times to become a well-known mbira player. Mbira, also called a thumb piano, resembles a large xylophone with 5 to 30 thin metal keys. It has been part of Shona culture for over a thousand years.

During the 1950s, Beulah D yoko, was sick for over a year when she was taken to a traditional healer. The healer said the young girl was possessed by an ancestor who had played the mbira and wanted D yoko to play the instrument. But because women were forbidden to play the mbira, these instructions were not followed. D yoko remained sick for another year until she herself dreamt of playing the mbira.

This time her mother, believing it was a further sign, agreed to buy her one. In 1996 D yoko told me how she was initiated by the ancestors into playing mbira. The day she got the mbira she dreamt of playing a song called 'B huka Tiende' (Wake up and go). "When I told my mother I had dreamt this song she asked me to play it and when I did, it was as if I had been playing mbira for a long time, because I played it so well."

When D yoko started playing the mbira she was healed. As a result, those in her community near Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique grudgingly accepted that women could play the mbira. During the 1960s, D yoko became the first woman to record mbira. She had been chosen by the ancestors. "If it is true that the mbira instrument was supposed to be played by men only then... the [spirit] could have gone to Beulah's brother or could have waited for Beulah to have sons which she has anyway," said Dumisani Maraire, an ethnomusicologist. "But the spirit chose to possess Beulah."

In 1980, Zimbabwe attained its independence and so did mbira playing. D yoko returned to the studio and Stella Chiveshe, now known internationally as the mbira queen of Zimbabwe, came onto the scene. Chiveshe had also learned to play mbira after a dream. Her mother dreamt that she had to teach all her children to play mbira. But while her brothers easily found teachers, no one wanted to teach Stella until an uncle stepped forward. She excelled far beyond her siblings. This was in keeping with the Shona belief that not everyone can learn to play the mbira; some are simply born to play while others are not.

In 1974, Chiveshe recorded her first single 'K asahwa'. It became a hit and was followed by 24 singles over the next six years. In 1985, she

formed her highly successful band, *Earthquake*. In early 1998, Chiveshe appeared as one of three women showcased on *Global Divas*, which toured all over the U.S. In the early 1980s, Chiveshe and D yoko made the mbira popular by adding guitars and taking it beyond the biras (night vigils). Soon they were no longer just considered women who play the mbira, but among the best African musicians worldwide. Their powerful female influence on this instrument laid the path for the next generation of women to make their own mark on the mbira.

#### ELIZABETH NCUBE: ONLY IMBONGI

It is also through dreams that Zimbabwe saw its first and only female imbongi (praise poet). Elizabeth Ncube. Ncube also became sick with an incurable illness. After the family tried everything to treat the illness she had a dream where her ancestors showed that they wanted her to become an imbongi. It was through her grandfather's spirit that Ncube became an imbongi when she was 11 in 1974. Her grandfather Mtetwa had been an imbongi for Mzilikazi, the Ndebele king who led the Ndebele people into Zimbabwe after battles with the Zulu king Shaka in South Africa. Elizabeth dreamt that she was wearing the clothes which her grandfather wore, and she used these clothes when performing.

Ncube's choice was not easily fulfilled. She was nearly killed by a male imbongi at a competition in Harare. He tried to attack Ncube with a spear as she was performing but she overpowered the man. She attributed her ability to fend him off to her warrior spirit. Ncube beat the two men whom she was competing with, including her attacker! When she met the man some months later and confronted him about wanting to kill her, he said "Wake wabona

ngaphi umfazi otanyula inyawo pambili kwabantu" ("Where did you see a woman who opens her legs in front of people").

Before she passed away Ncube performed in public places - even beer halls. Some encouraged her saying she reminded them of her grandfather. She also performed internationally in Chicago, Milwaukee, Boston, Detroit, Toronto and Holland.

Praise poetry in Ndebele culture is fundamentally political. It functioned to sing praises or to warn the head of state, and also to praise fighters when they left and when they returned from war.

Albert Nyathi, a famous Zimbabwean imbongi attributes the lack of female imbongi to the limitations that women face because they bore children and therefore could not go to war. It was the duty of the imbongi to go to war and to give moral support to the soldiers through praise poetry. However, since women were also involved in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle in the 1970s, it became appropriate for them also to be involved in the art of imbongi. Ncube started her imbongi performances at political gatherings and she performed to give cadres moral support in the camps.

Zimbabwe's liberation war was another authority that was able to partially override petty patriarchal rules. Although in the 1890s a woman like Nehanda had fought the British, the role of women in war had been forgotten or downplayed for decades. However, women resurfaced as freedom fighters during the liberation struggle and took their place in the political arena. Nehanda's spirit played an important role in guiding cadres and in ensuring that women mbira players were important during the war. Irene Chigamba also played for freedom fighters during the 1970s

#### as did Chiweshe FURTHER CHALLENGE, MIXED REACTIONS

Another challenge to the belief that women could not play mbira came from non-patriarchal men who argued against these beliefs. For instance, Dumisani Maraire, who introduced mbira to the American West Coast in the 1960s, strongly disputed the notion that mbira is not supposed to be played by women. He argued that he himself played the mbira because of his great grandmother. He argued that if women were not allowed to play mbira in *pasichigare* (the pre-colonial period) before 1860, then his grandmother and other women could not have played the instrument. Maraire also encouraged his daughter Chiwoniso to play the mbira, and today she is known in Zimbabwe and internationally as one of the country's best players.

Chiwoniso further revolutionised mbira by adding English lyrics and church songs. It was a natural choice for Chii, as she is affectionately known. She was born in Washington State in the United States where her parents were studying and teaching mbira. Chiwoniso started playing mbira at four, and at 12 she was performing with her parents on stage. She wrote music for the soundtrack to the Zimbabwean hit film *Everyone's Child* and has won many musical awards.

Similarly, Irene Chigamba plays mbira with her father, which has not gone down well with hard-core traditionalists. She learned the instrument from her father who had a hard time accepting that he himself had learned from his wife. When Chigamba started playing she was discouraged by relatives. "They would say that I would never get married because I had ventured into a man's world. They would also try to convince my mother to try and

stop me as this was going to bring bad spirits to me, but my mother stood by me."

Laina Gumboreshumba, a mbira player and teacher, was also encouraged by her father, Gwanzura Gumboreshumba, to play mbira. Gwanzura recorded a mbira video with Andrew Tracy in 1975. Laina, like Chigamba and Chiwoniso, performed with her father at biras and concerts. She has taken mbira music to another level as she is doing a Masters Degree in Music at Rhodes University.

But despite their successes, even today female mbira musicians receive mixed reactions. Some male musicians are angry that women are taking their place, while traditionalists continue to assert that women musicians offend the spirits. Chigamba's response is simple: "now that women can play traditional instruments much better than men, they are the ones who feel offended."

Although spirits speak to patriarchy, I am sure patriarchal spirits exist; otherwise where did all those men go? But the spirits of those representing all human beings regardless of sex have won the battle as women musicians have made a name for themselves as traditional performers. The most sacred and highly respected musical functions of the Shona (mbira) and Ndebele imbongi were passed on to women by their ancestors who chose them to continue their tradition. LB

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