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# Commentary

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[1] If we search for "thumb piano" on Google, we will most often see *kalimba* and *mbira* in the results; other names referring to the instruments in the same family, such as *ubọ-aka*, are much less visible. The Shona people of Zimbabwe use the term *mbira* to refer broadly to their traditional plucked idiophone, which is indigenous to their culture and holds great importance in their music and rituals. Specific variants of the instrument, like *mbira dzavadzimu* and *mbira nyunga nyunga*, exist within the tradition. The English ethnomusicologist Hugh Tracey (1903–1977) popularized the instrument outside Africa with the term *kalimba*, which now often refers to non-traditional thumb pianos, including those he made. For instance, Tracey's alto kalimba is modeled after the *mbira nyunga nyunga*. Instead of following the original tuning of the *mbira nyunga nyunga*, which is hexatonic, it is tuned to the G diatonic scale. Over time, the Zimbabwean term *mbira* has been generalized to represent all thumb pianos, including those found in Africa and South America (Kubik and Cooke 2001). The generalization of the indigenous name suggests that the Zimbabwean instruments, probably owing to Tracey's promotion, have served in the Anglophone world as important representatives of this family of lamellophones.

[2] In contrast to the lack of scholarly attention to the *ubọ-aka*, there are ample English books devoted specifically to the *mbira* in Zimbabwe: Paul F. Berliner's *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (1993), Chartwell Dutiro and Keith Howard's edited volume *Zimbabwean Mbira Music on an International Stage: Chartwell Dutiro's Life in Music* (2007), Luis Gimenez Amoros's *Tracing the Mbira: Sound Archive in Zimbabwe* (2018), to name a few. Quintina Carter-Ényì's paper and her interview with the Igbo *ubọ-aka* player Gerald Eze thus offer valuable knowledge about the hitherto understudied instrument in Nigeria, delving into its tuning, performance context, transmission history, and the ways in which Eze promotes it in, and adapts it for, the modern world.

[3] One of the fascinating things that Carter-Ényì and Eze reveal about the *ubọ-aka* is that its keys are linguistically tuned and that it can be used to teach the Igbo tonal language. This suggests that the tuning of the instrument is closely related to the speech tones of the Igbo language. While the underlying connection between the tuning of the *ubọ-aka* and the Igbo speech tones is not discussed, probably because of space constraints, it would be a great subject for further exploration. As the Igbo language has three tone levels (Liberman etal. 1992), would it be possible that the intervals among the three tone levels in some way shape the musical intervals among the pitches of the *ubọ-aka*, similar to the tone-melody relationship in Cantonese vocal music? How do Igbo language speakers perceive the Igbo speech tones in music? An understanding of the Igbo tone system and its influence on the tuning of the *ubọ-aka* can also cast light on the broader subject of the relationship between linguistic tones and musical melody in Igbo music, enriching the existing studies on

tone-melody relationship in music not only from Africa but also from other parts of the world (e.g., Jones 1959; List 1961; Schneider 1961; Agawu 1988; Chow 2012; Li 2021; Zhang and Cross 2024).

[4] Another promising area for future research with respect to the tuning of the *ubọ-aka* is the way in which Igbo *ubọ-aka* players name and conceptualize the pitches or keys of the instrument. In his *Soul of Mbira*, Paul Berliner (1993, 56–59) explores the relationship between the indigenous names of the *mbira* keys and the musical functions of the corresponding pitches. Although not every Zimbabwean musician names the individual keys of the *mbira*, and some musicians only attribute names to groups of pitches according to their registers, Berliner encountered an old musician, Mubayiwa Bandambira, who told him about a detailed classification system of the *mbira dzavadzimu* keys. In Bandambira's system, each pitch or pitch class on the *mbira* has a name that describes its symbolic meaning, musical quality, or effect on listeners. For instance, on a *mbira dzavadzimu* where the lowest and highest keys are respectively tuned to G2 and G5, the key tuned to G3 is named *benzi*, which means "mad person." According to Bandambira, it "makes the heart feel wild or excited like a mad person" and "has a sharp voice that leads the mbira." Berliner elaborates that the *benzi* is often used to open some classic *mbira* pieces, though the opening and ending pitches of a piece can vary according to the player's choice as the music is cyclical and improvisatory. The name of the key tuned to G2 is *gadzanga*, which is derived from the verb *kugadza*, meaning "to put in a stable position." Berliner suggests that this pitch functions as a tonal center for many pieces. Do Igbo musicians attribute names to the *ubọ-aka* keys as do Shona musicians to the *mbira* keys? Do the key names reflect the musicians' understanding of the functions and relations of the pitches used in *ubọ-aka* music? The answers to these questions might help us learn more about not only the connection between the tuning of the *ubọ-aka* and the structure of *ubọ-aka* music as perceived by Igbo musicians, but also that between the *mbira* and *ubọ-aka* in their history of development.

[5] As Carter-Ényì notes, there is a lack of written sources about the history and evolution of the *ubọ-aka*, so it is difficult to trace the transmission history of the instrument. Although the route and direction of transmission is unknown, perhaps a comparative study of different geographical variants of the instrument can provide some insight into how local cultures have shaped the tuning and playing techniques of thumb pianos in different places. The regionalization of the two-stringed spike fiddle in China can serve as a case for comparison. Imported as a foreign instrument, the two-stringed spike fiddle mainly takes a dominant form called *erhu* 二胡, but it has also other variants with different sizes and materials, so that their registers and timbres could be adapted to different regional musical styles. For instance, the *erxian* 二弦 and *gaohu* 高胡 in Cantonese music, the *jinghu* 京胡 in Peking opera, and the *tiqin* 提琴 for *Kunqu* (Stock 1993, 100–102). Eze stresses that the *ubọ-aka* is distinct from the thumb pianos in other African cultures in its tuning, construction, playing techniques, and cultural meaning. It might be possible that the *ubọ-aka* was also adapted from an imported thumb piano to suit the local style of Igbo music.

[6] Eze also asserts that the instrument's name, which is drawn from the Igbo language by combining *ubọ* ("a plucked instrument") and *aka* ("hand"), reflects the localness of the *ubọ-aka*. While the attribution of an indigenous name to an instrument indeed suggests the creation or domestication of that instrument by the local people, the broader meaning of *ubọ-aka* to encompass all instruments that are plucked by the hand also raises a question: Has the name *ubọ-aka* always been referred to the same instrument?

[7] As the meaning of a word can evolve over time, it is possible that the compound word *ubọ-aka* was historically used to name some other instruments. Let us take the Chinese plucked-string instrument *pipa* 琵琶 as an example. The *pipa* that we normally refer to nowadays is a pear-shaped four-stringed lute with a short, crooked neck (historically, there were also five-stringed variants). However, this type of lute was not transmitted to China until the sixth century (Picken 1955, 38), and the name *pipa* could already be found in a book written around the third century, namely Liu Xi's 劉熙 (fl. ca. 200 CE) *Explanations of Names* (*Shiming* 釋名). According to Liu, the word *pipa* refers to the plucking actions of the hand: "Pushing the hand forward is called 'pi枇'; pulling the hand backward is called 'pa杷'" (cited in Picken 1955, 33). This suggests that *pipa* could be a generic term indexing all plucked lutes, including the round-shaped straight-necked lute known today as *ruan* 阮 or *ruanxian* 阮咸, which adopted its name from the renowned player Ruan Xian (fl. ca. 260 CE). In Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) sources, such as the *Book of Sui* (*Suishu* 隋書) and *Comprehensive Institutions* (*Tongdian* 通典), the word *pipa* was often used with a modifier to distinguish between the bent-necked and straight-necked lutes, which were referred to as the *hu pipa* 胡琵琶 and *qin pipa* 秦琵琶 respectively. If the *ubọ-aka*, like *pipa*, was historically used to denote some other lamellophones or

hand-plucked instruments imported or invented earlier, then it is more likely that the prototype of the current *ubọ-aka* was brought to Igbo by local or foreign travelers instead of originating from there.

[8] As a historian of Chinese music, I have made several speculations about the transmission and development of the *ubọ-aka* based on some cases drawn from Chinese music history. This is not to suggest that the Igbo thumb piano necessarily followed the same pattern of development as the Chinese musical instruments. These examples are not used for making direct analogous inferences. Rather, they serve as a source of inspiration for our rumination on and imagination of the history of the instrument against the lack of historical sources. Although we may not know whether the *ubọ-aka* was developed by Igbo musicians independently or modeled on other thumb pianos outside Igbo, what can be certain is that even if the *ubọ-aka* was once an instrument foreign to Igbo, it has now, as Eze remarks, integrated into Igbo culture, continuously shaping and being shaped by the evolving lives of the Igbo people.

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