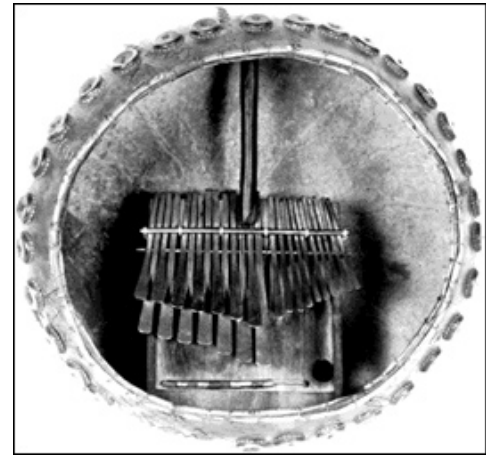


# Fact sheet about the Kalimba

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The Kalimba, or African thumb piano, is a modern member of a family of ancient African instruments called *lamellaphones*. In Africa, each cultural group has their own type of kalimba, and their own name. The instrument shown to the right is called an *mbira*, and is played by the Shona people of Zimbabwe. It is usually played inside a gourd which acts as an amplifier. The mbira has between 21 and 25 different notes and is considered the most developed type of traditional African lamellaphone. It is used in a ceremony called *a bira* in which people play the favorite songs of a particular ancestor to lure the spirit of that ancestor to the ceremony in order to communicate with them. Because the Shona people believe that it is very important to be on good terms with their ancestors, the *mbira* is central to Shona society.



The ancestor of the kalimba seems to have been invented twice in Africa: wood-tined kalimbas were first made about 3000 years ago around present-day Cameroon, and metal-tined kalimbas were made around present-day Zimbabwe over 1000 years ago. Log marimbas (xylophones) were common in Africa, and the kalimba-like instruments are thought to be portable xylophones. Kalimbas were documented by Portuguese explorers in 1570, as well as by German and English explorers in the 1700s and 1800s. The kalimba is Africa's unique contribution to the world of music.

There are over 100 different types of kalimba-like instruments in Africa, each with their own note layout and tuning. The tunings and note layouts were passed down from generation to generation.

Until the 20th century, many Europeans did not think that African people had any culture worth studying. Hugh Tracey was an Englishman who was sent to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) at the age of 17 to work on his cousin's tobacco farm, but he quickly fell in love with African music and culture, and he spent most of his life documenting and preserving traditional African music and instruments. African people did not recognize that western culture was rising up around them and changing their own culture. However, when Hugh Tracey would travel around and ask to hear people in a remote village play their music, he would often hear the villagers singing church hymns taught by missionaries. Hugh Tracey knew that the traditional kalimbas had a non-western tuning, but the influence of western culture - first through Christian missionaries, then through songs played on the radio - would forever change the face of traditional African music. Several times in the 1920s through 1950s Hugh Tracey got grant funding to enable him to travel around rural Africa and record traditional music before it was buried by western influences. In 1954, he started the International Library of African Music (<http://ilam.ru.ac.za>), which still maintains the largest collection of recordings of African music in the world. Shortly after, Hugh Tracey started making kalimbas and selling them around the world.

The kalimba has become a symbol of black pride and African heritage, and it is played by many people, black and white, searching for a connection to ancient African culture.

