The Kalimba: A Brief History of an Ancient Instrument from Africa

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Most people know that loud drumming is central to African music.
But not so many people know about the delicate sounds of the African lamellophones.
"lamella" = Latin for "plate"
"phone" = Greek for "sound"
In Africa, each cultural group has their own name for the instrument. The *mbira* is one of the most advanced types of traditional *lamellophone*.

It is played inside a gourd to amplify the instrument’s sound and to add a buzz.

**PLAY**
There are over 100 kinds of traditional African lamellophones, each with its own tuning, note layout, and name. And until about 50 years ago, almost nobody outside of Africa had ever built or played one.
In America, we now call these instruments *thumb pianos* or *kalimbas* - they are usually tuned to the western “Do-Re-Mi” scale, but their roots are uniquely African.
The kalimba is about 1300 or 3000 years old, depending on what you call a kalimba.
The kalimba is believed to have been independently invented in two different places and times in Africa.

Bamboo: 1000 BC

Metal: 700 AD
Studies of xylophone and kalimba music indicate that the kalimba was likely invented as a **portable xylophone**.

From David Livingston, before 1865
Xylophones were played by 2 people on opposite sides with interlocking patterns. On the kalimba, one person could perform those interlocking patterns.
The **Karimba** has a tuning and note layout that could be 500 years old.
How do we know how old these are?

The first European documentation of the *kalimba* was around 1570, by Portuguese explorers. But the metal-tined *kalimbas* had already spread across Africa by then. So the first kalimba-like instruments were made in Africa long before then.

Archeologists have found mbira tines at sites thought to date to over 1000 years ago.
African slaves in Brazil were documented to have had *kalimbas* in the late 1700’s, but the instrument had disappeared in South America by about 1900.

A wood carving of a *kalimba* player dancing, Mozambique, 1723.
David Livingstone documented the Sansa and Mbira before 1865.
Carl Mauch documented the tuning and note layout of the Shona Mbira in 1872.

When Andrew Tracey documented the Mbira tuning 90 years later, the instrument had evolved, but was consistent.
By the late 1890’s several *kalimbas* had found their way into European museums, but the museum pieces were not well studied or appreciated until Gerhard Kubik’s work in 1998.

The understanding that kalimbas were real musical instruments dawned slowly on people in the 20th century.
An Englishman named Hugh Tracey fell in love with mbira music in Rhodesia and started recording it in 1929. Major grant funding permitted him to spend most of 1952 and 1957 recording across Africa.
Hugh Tracey also learned to play the different kinds of kalimbas and mbiras he encountered, and he documented their tunings and note layouts.

In 1954, Hugh Tracey founded the International Library of African Music to archive the thousands of hours of recordings he had taken. Shortly after, he founded African Musical Instruments (AMI) and started making high quality kalimbas for export to Europe and America. Within a few years, dozens of kalimba makers sprung up around the world.
Dr Hugh Tracey’s work documents **over a hundred different kinds of kalimba**. Basically, each group of people who encountered the kalimba changed the instrument, its tuning, and its uses to fit their culture.

One of those instruments was the *mbira*, which has a very important cultural use to the Shona people of Zimbabwe.
The Shona people believe that God gave the *mbira* to humans, and that the *mbira*’s sound attracts the spirits of our ancestors.

Most traditional religions in Africa involved some form of ancestor worship. The Shona felt they had to be on good terms with their ancestors’ spirits, or the world would be in danger of disaster.
For those hours, the spirit would inhabit the body of an appointed spiritual medium.

In the *bira* ceremony, *mbira* players play the favorite songs of a deceased person to entice their spirit to return for a few hours to visit with family and friends.
Just as African peoples adapted the kalimba to their own music, so did Hugh Tracey. He started building his own kalimbas in the late 1950s, using the western “Do Re Mi” scale.

A hollow-body kalimba, 1898.
In the 1960s, the kalimba burst forth onto the world stage when Hugh Tracey’s sons Andrew and Paul wrote a musical review called *Wait a Minim* which went to Broadway and played around the world for 7 years.

Basically, white people introduced African music to people around the world because the people somehow weren’t ready to hear black Africans playing their own music.
In fact, there is something wrong with this history of the kalimba. These instruments were created from the imagination and soul of black Africans, but almost everything we know about the kalimba comes to us from white people who were fascinated by the instrument.
Malcolm X, a prominent black leader in the 1960s, drove home the point that black Americans didn’t know their own heritage. They didn’t even know their own ancestral name, so he changed his last name to X, representing his unknown and lost cultural heritage.
In the 1970s, African Americans re-discovered the kalimba and used it to reconnect with an African cultural heritage that had been robbed from them when they had been forcibly taken from Africa in the slave trade centuries earlier.

Maurice White played kalimba with his band Earth, Wind and Fire.
Meanwhile, in Africa, *mbira* artists adapted their music to the modern times, sometimes adding electric guitars and modern drums to the traditional songs.
Even though the kalimba is an ancient instrument with roots in Africa, it is alive and well, moving out into the future with modern innovations.
Even though it was uniquely African, the kalimba is becoming part of our world wide human heritage.
The story of the kalimba is largely unknown. We can see the shape of its history, but we do not know the name of this kalimba player, we do not know the names of the people who made many innovations in design over many centuries. We do not know the names of the people who invented the different tunings or wrote the songs. But their collective wisdom is placed in our hands every time we pick up a thumb piano and play.
In addition to thousands of hours of sound recordings, Dr. Hugh Tracey also left us a book of stories that he collected on his travels across Africa.
You can learn more about the kalimba at:


http://www.wikipedia.com

African Lamellophones by Gerhardt Kubrick

The Soul of Mbira by Paul F. Berliner