
A CASE FOR THE NAME MBIRA

by

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It is perhaps strange that one of Africa's most important small musical instruments should suffer from an incorrect naming at the hands of many ethnomusicologists and museum keepers, those who should be most concerned to give it its rightful name and place in the catalogue of this continent's instruments.

The instrument is popularly known under several rather nebulous names such as 'Kaffir Piano', 'Hand Piano', 'Thumb Piano' and 'Pianino', by those whose major criterion is the modern pianoforte; and 'Sansa' by students who have taken their cue unquestioningly from the printed pages of earlier writers. It is doubly strange that students who would otherwise shrink from misnomers should continue to use the term 'sansa' when by all accounts no indigenous African musician uses this name for his instrument (unless he has learnt it from the same literary sources). The origin of this error appears to be with David Livingstone.

In his book "Expedition to the Zambezi, 1858-64" (John Murray, London, p. 13) David Livingstone states that he used both his own journal and observations from that of his brother, Charles Livingstone, when compiling his narrative for publication "for the sake of the freshness which usually attaches to first impressions." Then he adds, "And doubtless many will prefer to draw their own conclusions from them rather than to be schooled by us." It is this liberty which I now propose to take.

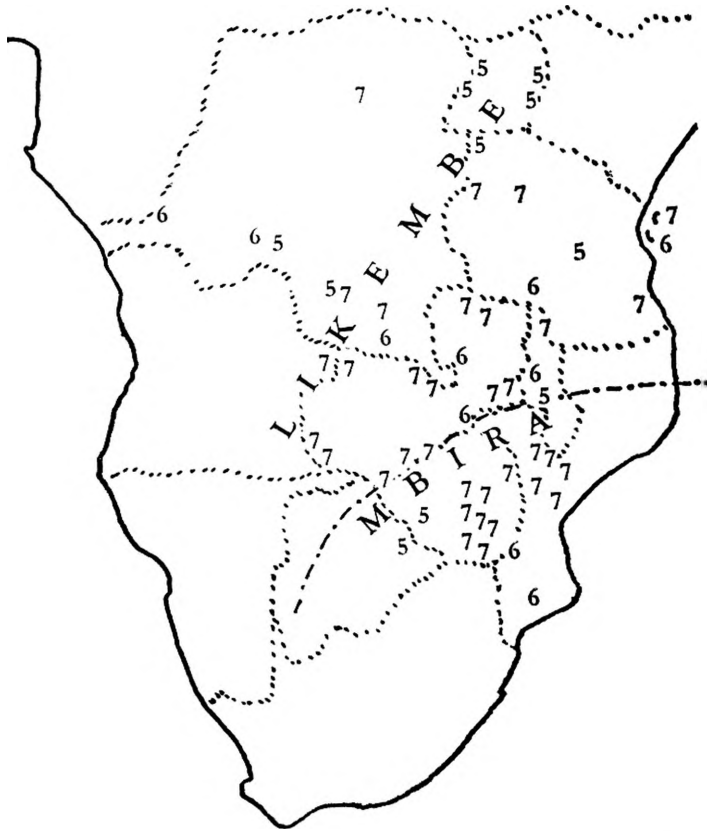
I have failed to find any reference in David Livingstone's own diaries which would indicate that the statement made about this instrument in his book was, in fact, his own observation. It would therefore seem to be more likely that the details were contributed by his brother Charles. The reference to the instrument is made on pages 236 and 237, illustrated by an excellent woodcut of two instruments¹, the one large with 22 reeds, and the other small with 9 reeds. It is this smaller instrument which is called 'sansa' in the text. From the date of the publication of this volume (1865) onwards writers on the subject of African music have unquestioningly followed the Doctor, whose accuracy in his descriptions of Africa and its people was rarely questioned by the British public, for whom he was rapidly gaining a legendary reputation through his fight against the slave trade, and the efforts by which he had "striven, however imperfectly, to elevate the position and character of our fellow-men in Africa" (ibid. p. 2).

About three hundred years earlier, the Portuguese explorers had also noted this instrument played in the same region of south eastern Africa and had described it by the name by which it is still generally recognised today in those parts of the country, 'Ámbira', allowing for the difficulty experienced by Europeans to recognise and pronounce the closed 'm' sound with which so many Bantu words begin.

It seems highly probable that Charles Livingstone, if it was indeed he who was the observer, had misheard the name '*sansi*' and had written down '*sansa*' as the name of the small nine-note instrument, being still little acquainted with an African language . . . a simple mistake that any beginner might make on 'first impressions'.

The name *sansi* is still found in the lower Zambezi valley as well as '*Kasansi*', meaning 'the small *sansi*'. Two of Livingstone's companions in the valley, the artist Thomas Baines and the missionary James Stewart, both give 'Cassance' or 'Kassanse' in their descriptions of the instrument.

¹Reproduced on the cover of this number.



Map I. Modal distribution of the instruments Mbira and Likembe. Pentatonic=5. Hexatonic=6. and Heptatonic=7. (Not all instruments listed appear on these diagrams).

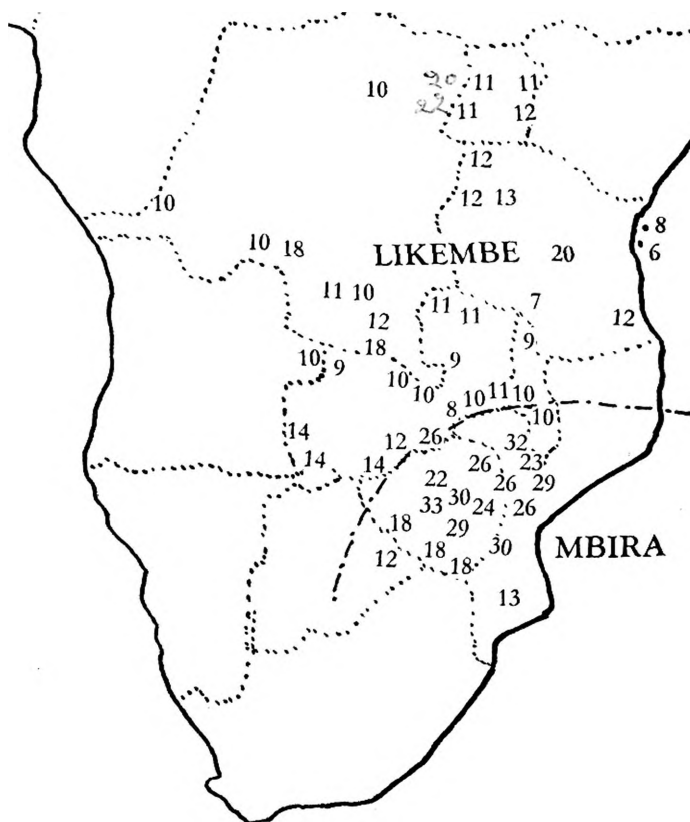
Thomas Baines mentions it several times in his diaries, the first entry being on September 1st, 1869², near Hartley Hill in Southern Rhodesia; "One or two (Mashonas) played as they went on the cassance or Zambebian keyboard" to which the editor nonchalantly adds the explanatory footnote—"The 'Kaffir Piano', *sansa* or *kirimba*", none of which are correct.

Baines' spelling of *kasansi* (p. 139, Vol. 1) is in keeping with the orthography of his day. In later entries he somewhat spoils his first attempt by using two different spellings for the same instrument. On Tuesday, 19th July, 1870, he writes:

"The chief has two musicians who have excellent casansas which", he said, "make no despicable music." On the following day Thomas Baines remarks: "His two cassanca minstrels have been playing all day, not unpleasantly; one tune reminds me of a Spanish air." By July 24th, five days later, his small party had had enough of their music and he reports that the cassanca players were told to go away.

Baines is clearly relying on his memory and has forgotten his more correct spelling of ten months before. In any case the instrument he was describing would not have

²The Northern Goldfields Diaries of Thomas Baines, 1869-72, Chatto and Windus, Oppenheimer Series No. 3, Vol. 1, p. 139, Vol. II, pp. 405, 407 and 414.



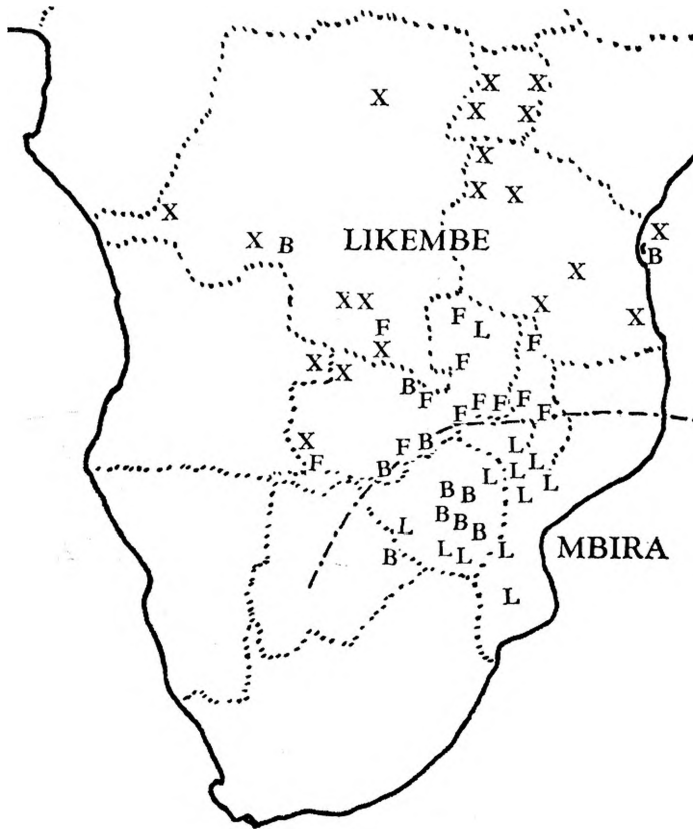
Map II. Distribution of Mbira and Likembe showing the number of reeds on each instrument.

borne the local Zambezi name of *kasansi* but is likely to have been 'Mbira' or 'Njari' in the vicinity of Hartley Hill. He was no doubt remembering the field notes published by David Livingstone on their Zambezi expedition some ten years earlier. Players of the *Mbira* feature in several of Thomas Baines' paintings in the possession of the Central African Archives. Two players are featured in a drawing called "Mashona trading at Umtingasa's", the one in the left foreground and the other leaning up against a hut in the middle distance.

James Stewart's reference to the 'kassanse' is to be found in his journal published in the Oppenheimer Series, No. 6 (The Zambezi Journal of James Stewart, 1862-1863, p. 254. Chatto and Windus).

During several journeys into the Zambezi valley, the first in 1927, I have often found examples of the *sansi*, the *kasansi* and in some regions another variety locally called '*nsansi*'. Never in the last thirty years have I found any Zambezi musician using the name '*sansa*'.

Reverting to the Livingstone narrative, the instrument referred to in the text is illustrated in the woodcut (p. 237) together with a larger specimen with its resonating gourd. In his preface (p. vii) Livingstone gives credit to the sketches by Thomas Baines used in the book, all of which appear to be acknowledged by name, and also to the photographs by Charles Livingstone and Dr. Kirk. The woodcut is clearly an accurate



Map III. Structure of resonating bodies of Mbira and Likembe. X = Box. L = Bell. B = Board and F = Fan-shaped, with or without additional external resonators. Likembe are mostly box and fan shaped. Mbira are mostly board or bell shaped.

reproduction by a skilled hand and is likely to have been taken directly from a photograph, or rather from three photographs. The illustration of the *sansi* is somewhat indistinct on account, no doubt, of the perspective involved. But the illustration of the other instrument is so clear that I can identify it with reasonable certainty as one of the *Njari* family, most likely the '*njari buru*' which is also found in the same lower Zambezi regions around Tete, and an example of which with 26 reeds is to be seen among my collection of instruments in the Africana Museum in Johannesburg.

All the instruments of this family of plucked idiophones share the same generic name of *Mbira* within the South Eastern territories of Africa, and the use of this term either as *Mbira* or *Mbila* is clear to all musicians speaking any of the Bantu languages in the area. (See Map I, p. 18).

It is patent to any music research student in this part of Africa that there are several types of *mbira* which go by different local names to distinguish them from each other, and it is significant that it is within these territories that the *mbira* family has achieved its most developed forms. The map (No. II, p. 19) shows the localities in which instruments of more than twenty reeds are to be found. Amongst them is the *sansi* or *nsansi*. It is the *kasansi*, the 'little *sansi*', which has eight, nine or ten reeds only. The *Nsansi* may have as many as 22.

This raises a second interesting point concerning David Livingstone's narrative. The musician whose instrument is detailed and illustrated was not a local man in the lower valley but a member of his own staff, a Batoka from further West, or, as they are now called, Valley Tonga. A few years ago I took several recordings of Valley Tonga musicians among whom were five *mbira* players. That section of the tribe which lives upstream towards the Victoria Falls and Barotseland tend to use a smaller instrument which they call either 'Kankowela' or 'Kankobela', a name commonly used by the Lozi. The generic name for all varieties found in these more westerly regions of Northern Rhodesia, S. Angola through south and south-east Congo and as far north as Uganda is not *mbira* but 'Likembe'.

The downstream Valley Tonga of the Gwembe district prefer the large instrument constructed after the fashion of those to be found in Southern Rhodesia. One example I found there was called 'Deza', a name which in adjoining districts is derived from the name of the resonating gourd, *deze*, within which the instrument is often played to give it extra resonance. Several Southern Rhodesian Shona will call their *mbira*, *njari* or *bera* by the familiar name of *deze* while at the same time giving the actual keyboard itself its correct name whichever it may be, in the same way as one might refer to one's radiogram or record player as one's 'loudspeaker'. Yet, in the narrative, the Batoka's instrument is referred to as a 'sansa' (i.e. *Kasansi*), a name unknown in the upstream regions. This may well have arisen from the superficial similarity of the small *kankobela* to the equally small *kasansi* in the Tete region, though the former, in Barotseland, is usually fan-shaped and the latter is bell-shaped. The Livingstones, I suggest, might not have made a technical distinction between the two as it is unlikely that their respective features would have appeared significant to them. The small instrument represented in the woodcut may even have been an upstream *kankobela* and not a downstream *kasansi*. The picture is not sufficiently clear to determine the point, and it is possible that the reeds may have been displaced from their normal playing array, as the bass notes appear to be on the right, an unusual if not altogether unknown feature in present day instruments.

If it is granted that David Livingstone may have erred in unwittingly giving an incorrect name to this family of African musical instruments, the problem of finding a generic name which will be generally accepted by African musicians everywhere is still not solved. The case, however, for using the generic name of *Mbira* for all those African instruments which fall into the category of 'plucked idiophones' is clear and watertight, for two reasons:

1. The name *Mbira* is an already established generic name for the instrument among Africans in a large part of the total area in which it is known (See Maps).
2. It is under this name that, as far as present research indicates, the instrument has attained its greatest technological and musical development in Africa.

This name is infinitely preferable to the misnomer of 'sansa', which as far as one can discover, is used by no present day Africans at all.

On the other hand, the present dilemma poses a question to musicologists to discover other generic names for the whole family of these instruments, determine their boundaries and application and if necessary find a satisfactory compromise for the foreigner who wishes to describe them in his treatises under one acceptable title. I personally am reluctant to perpetuate the misnomer 'sansa' even if it has nearly a hundred years of usage behind it and a legendary name as great as that of David Livingstone as its parent.

The following list of names given to a number of *Mbira*, *Likembe* and other members of this important musical instrument family are given in order to show the wide variety of local names which are to be found between the Sudan and the Cape. In this

list I give only the names of a few of those instruments which I have myself handled and recorded and where I had the opportunity of taking measurements and noting the array of reeds with some detail. I have seen scores, if not hundreds of other instruments in action which I have been unable to measure; these, together with duplicates, have not been included.

NAMES OF THE MBIRA FAMILY

Recorded and noted by Hugh Tracey

<i>Name</i>	<i>Tribe</i>	<i>Type of Soundboard</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>No. of Notes</i>
BUDONGO.	Ganda/Soga. Uganda.	Box.	Pentatonic.	11.
a)				
b) Ndumi				
c) Nene				
CHIKELEKELE.	Luvale. N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Uncertain.	7 Fibre.
CHILIMBA.	Bemba. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	11.
CHIRIMBA.	Bemba. N. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	11.
CHITENGANE.	Kalanga. Bechuanaland.	Board.	Pentatonic.	12.
CHISANZHI.	Luba. Katanga.	Box.	Hexatonic.	
a) Chinene				12.
b) Tendo				12.
c) Madimba Manene				10.
d) Bilonda.				10.
CHISANZHI.	Lulua. Kasai.	Box.	Hexatonic.	10.
"	Songe. Katanga.	Board.	Pentatonic.	18.
"	Songe/Kalebwe. Katanga.	Box.	Heptatonic.	11.
"	Lunda. Katanga.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	8.
DEZA.	Valley Tonga. N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	26.
DONGO.	Dhola. E. Uganda.	Box.	Pentatonic.	12.
HERA.	Chikunda. Moçambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	32.
IKEMBE.	Rundi/Hangaza. Tanganyika.	Box.	Pentatonic.	10.
ILIMBA.	Nkonde. Tanganyika.	Box.	Hexatonic.	7.
"	Gogo. Tanganyika.	Box.	Pentatonic.	20.
INDIMBA.	Tonga (Plateau). N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	14.
IRIMBA.	Makua. Moçambique.	Box.	Uncertain.	7.
KALIMBA.	Bisa. N. Rhodesia.	Box.	Uncertain.	14.
"	Lala. N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	10.
"	Maswaka. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	10.
"	Nyamwezi. Tanganyika.	Box.	Heptatonic.	13.
"	Tumbuka/Henga. Nyasaland.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	9.

KALIMBA.	Nyanja/Chewa. Nyasaland.	Fan.	Hexatonic.	10.
"	Nsenga. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	10.
"	Chikunda. Mocambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	23.
"	Zulu/Ngoni. Nyasaland.	Bell.	Uncertain.	9.
"	Karanga. S. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Uncertain.	13.
"	Chokwe. Angola.	Bell.	Uncertain.	10.
KANGOMBIO.	Kalanga/Roswi. N. Rhodesia.	?	Uncertain.	?
"	Lozi. N. Rhodesia.	Box.	Heptatonic.	14.
KANKOBELA.	Valley Tonga. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	12.
KANKOBELE(KANKOWELE)	Lala. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Hexatonic.	8.
"	Lala. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	11.
"	Bisa. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Hexatonic.	9.
"	Lenje. N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Uncertain.	13.
KANKOWELA.	Valley Tonga. N. Rhodesia.	Fan.	Uncertain.	10.
KASANSI.	Chikunda. Mocambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	8-10.
Katchatcha. KATHANDI.	(see Chikelekele). Mbunda. Barotseland.	Fan.	Heptatonic.	14.
KIDEBE.	Nguja. Zanzibar.	Board.	Hexatonic.	6.
KISAZHI.	Chokwe. Congo.	Board.	Uncertain.	6.
LIKEMBE.	Nyoro. Uganda.	Box.	Pentatonic.	11.
"	Toro. Uganda.	Box.	Pentatonic.	11.
"	Ngala. Congo.	Box.	Hexatonic.	10.
"	Luba. Kasai.	Box.	Pentatonic.	10 & 12.
"	Songe. Congo.	Box.	Pentatonic.	10.
"	Luvale. Angola.	Box.	Heptatonic.	10.
"	Chokwe. N. Rhodesia.	Box.	Heptatonic.	9.
LISANZO.	Bua. N. Congo.	Box.	Heptatonic.	10.
MADEBE DZAMONDORO.	Korekore. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	26.
MARIMBA.	Kwaya/Jita. Tanganyika.	Box.	Heptatonic.	12.
"	Sukuma. Tanganyika.	Box.	Uncertain.	12.
"	Tonga/Bila. Mocambique.	Bell.	Hexatonic.	13.
MARIMBA MADOGO.	Nguja. Zanzibar.	Box.	Heptatonic.	8.
MARIMBE.	Nyoro/Zinza. Tanganyika.	Box.	Heptatonic.	18.
MBIRA.	Karanga. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	18.

MBIRA DZA WANDAU.	Ndau. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Hexatonic.	30.
MBIRA DOKO.	Karanga. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Pentatonic.	18. (an imported specimen)
MBIRA HURU.	Zezuru. S. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	22.
MSAMBI (DIKEMBE).	Kikongo. Congo.	Box.	Hexatonic.	10.
NDIMBA.	Nsenga. N. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	14.
NJALI.	Chikunda. Moçambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	28.
NJARI.	Karanga. S. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	30.
"	Zezuru. S. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	29.
NJARI HURU.	Chikunda. Moçambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	26.
NJARI DZA MANJANJA.	Karanga. S. Rhodesia.	Board.	Heptatonic.	33.
NSANSI.	Sena/Tonga. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	19.
SANSI.	Sena/Tonga. Moçambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	26.
"	Chikunda. Moçambique.	Bell.	Heptatonic.	24.
"	Nyanja/Chewa. Nyasaland.	Fan.	Pentatonic.	10.
TIMBILA.	Hlengwe. S. Rhodesia.	Bell.	Uncertain.	20.

Name. *Tribe.* *Type of Soundboard.* *Mode.* *No. of Notes*

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In addition to these names other observers have listed a number of local names, though generally without specifying the number of reeds used or the nature of the construction of the resonating member. Among such lists are the following:—

In 'Tribal Crafts of Uganda' (Oxford University Press 1953) Dr. K. P. Wachsmann mentions under the title of 'Plucked Idiophones':

<i>Name.</i>	<i>Tribe.</i>		
<i>Lukeme.</i>	Acoli.	8 or 9 reeds.	No scales or tunings given.
<i>Lukembe.</i>	Alur.		
<i>Likembe.</i>	Amba.	9, 10 or 11.	
<i>Kibikembe.</i>	(Near Ruwenzori).		
<i>Kabarome.</i>	Mbuti Pygmies.		

Bertil Söderberg in his 'Les Instruments de Musique au Bas-Congo et dans les Régions Avoisnantes' (Statens Etnografiska Museum, Stockholm 1956) gives this list of names without indicating their tribal origins or the nature of their separate arrays:

Diti, biti, kibiti, nsansi, sanxi, isanxi, geliti, nxanga, mbobila, dimba, marimba, kinditi kiantele kia mbasa, kianditi kia nsi.

The name *marimba*, he mentions, is also used for the xylophone in certain regions, a comment which holds good for the East Coast as well as for the Bas Congo.

Stephen Chauvet in his 'Musique Nègre' (Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, Paris, 1929) enumerates a number of these instruments under the general name of *M'bichi*, with their tribal origin.

<i>Name.</i>	<i>Tribe.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Tribe</i>
<i>Marimba.</i>	Bangalos.	<i>Kimbanda.</i>	Betetela.
<i>M'bichi.</i>	„	<i>Ibeka.</i>	Bakalais.
<i>Likembi.</i>	„	<i>Pokido.</i>	Lukele.
<i>Lusukia.</i>	Wasongola.	<i>Ekende.</i>	Bangala.
<i>Kansambi.</i>	Warega.	<i>Maringa.</i>	Badjande.
<i>Kizanza.</i>	Valuba.	<i>Djunba.</i>	Turumbu.
<i>Sanza.</i>	Babunda, Bakwese.	<i>Kisachi.</i>	Haut-Sankuru.
<i>Zimba.</i>	„ „	<i>Lulumba.</i>	South Congo.
<i>Kibanda.</i>	„ „	<i>Sansi.</i>	English Africa.

This list of names unaccompanied by further details is of little use except to note that various travellers had noted a wide variety of local names before 1930.

Prof. P. R. Kirby in his 'Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa' (Witwatersrand, 1953) mentions the Mbira of the Venda tribe under the name *deze*, and that of the Pedi tribe, giving no name (it is in fact called *dipila*, a word closely related to *Mbira*). He also gives the approximate tunings in keyboard notation and the array of reeds.

In West Africa the instrument is found at least as far west as Sierra Leone. During a recent visit to West Africa I heard of three names, *Bala de Minyanka*, from the Sara-kole tribe of Mali; *Agidigbo* from the Yoruba of western Nigeria and *Obo* from the Ijaw and Kalahari people of the Niger delta. No one could give me a generic name in common use.

In all, nearly a hundred names have been given to this unique African instrument but still, with the two exceptions of *Mbira* and *Likembe*, no generic names have so far been discovered. Others no doubt exist and may yet be determined but, for the time being, only these two can be relied upon as genuine appellatives. From this evidence it is clear that the name 'sansa' should be discarded and one or other of the African names adopted. *Mbira* has clearly the first claim to recognition.