
THE MWERA LAMELLOPHONE *LULIIMBA*¹

by

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Introduction

The lamellophone of the Makonde/Mwera type from south-eastern Tanzania and north-eastern Mozambique is a particular member of the family of lamellophones in Africa. It has been described by Margot Dias (1982, 1986, 1988) and Gerhard Kubik (1996, 1998), but until recently had not been studied in a performance context. Its particular features are as follows: 1) the seven relatively broad metal keys are fixed in the body of the instrument, so that their tuning cannot be altered; 2) the top part of the instrument has a roof-like shape; 3) the resonator box is hollowed out from the back and closed with a wooden cover which is nailed to it. Additionally, the sound-holes in the soundboard could be used to produce wow-effects by covering and uncovering them, as has been shown by Kubik (1998:195).²

This type of lamellophone has drawn scholarly interest because of its uniqueness. Kubik assumes that it could be the remnant of a small cradle area of lamellophones with metal keys in the lower Rovuma valley, apart from the large metal-keyed lamellophones found in Zimbabwe and the lower Zambezi valley (Kubik 1998:24 f). Furthermore, Kubik et al. point to a similarity of shape between Indonesian metallophones of the *saron* type and the Makonde/Mwera type of lamellophone, in terms of the curved box resonator and the roof-like top of the instruments (Kubik et al. 1985-87, see also Kubik 1998: 42, 196 f). The position of the metal keys can be seen as rotated by 90° compared to the *saron*. This could possibly be supportive of Arthur M. Jones' hypothesis on Indonesian xylophones being the model for African lamellophones (1973/74:96 f), as well as of his assumption of cultural influences from Indonesia on Africa (1964). Roger Blench (1982) showed that the latter does not stand up to detailed scrutiny. However, he admits that the striking similarity between xylophones in Asia and Africa needs to be explained, and he points to the possibility that the migration of xylophones could have been in the opposite direction, i.e. from Africa to Asia (Blench 2002:4 f). It seems that this debate is not yet closed and that perhaps the Makonde/Mwera-type of lamellophone could provide a particular link in the musical history of East Africa.

Despite the interesting features of this type of instrument little is known about it.

¹ I wish to thank Prof. Gerhard Kubik for discussing my research with me, as well as commenting on a draft version of this paper. Also, I would like to thank the players and owners of lamellophones for their collaboration, and my friends in Nachingwea for making the contact with the musicians.

² However, the Mwera players of the *luliimba* whom I observed playing did not use the holes in this way (see Playing technique on pages 12 and 13).

Dias has described the instruments in her collection and those from various European museums, which were mostly collected before World War II. She coined the name “Makonde/Mwera type of the lamellophone”, as all instruments were collected in areas inhabited by either Makonde or Mwera. However, nothing was documented about the use of the instrument nor about the music played on it. This was all the more deplored by scholars as it was assumed that the instrument was already extinct (Kubik 1998:195 f).

This article is based on research conducted in the Mwera area of south-eastern Tanzania, more specifically, in villages of Nachingwea District in the Lindi region, in 1987 and 1999.³ In 1987, friends of mine from Nachingwea arranged a visit to two well-known *luliimba* musicians, one in the village of Kipara, the other in Lionja. Both were elderly men and very skilled players. I recorded some pieces from both and took a few photographs. At the time of my second visit in 1999 the musician from Lionja had recently died and the one in Kipara could not be contacted. In the case of the musician from Lionja, his son had taken over the instrument. I had the opportunity to talk to him and record his playing on video. The efforts to find other musicians were only partly successful. Two more owners of a *luliimba* lamellophone were found and visited, one in Ruponda, the other in Ntila. Both were old men. One of them had inherited the instrument but could not play it, while the other could play, but had not used his *luliimba* often during the last years. The problem in finding players of *luliimba* points to the fact that the instrument is about to disappear, an impression shared by the people in the area.

Name, history and recent use of the instrument

The Mwera call their lamellophone *luliimba* (class 11 in the Bantu noun class system) in the singular, and *nniimba* (class 10) in the plural. Sometimes *malimba* (class 6) is heard in the plural. Apparently, there is no oral tradition concerning the origin of the instrument. It is just said to have always been there. This may indicate that the *luliimba* has a very long tradition among the Mwera. It is the only type of lamellophone they have. Everybody knows about it but the musicians, who are mainly old men, are very few nowadays. As in other parts of Africa the instrument's use has been declining since the middle of the 20th century. At the moment there is no sign that this musical tradition could be revived. This is due to the increasing use of the guitar by younger people and the influence of pop music. The latter comes in via radio, cassettes, and video. Some young men engage in the business of showing videos in villages. They bring their equipment, including a generator for the supply of electricity. The most attractive genres are sports and music videos.

Organology of the *luliimba*

The body of the *luliimba* is made from the hard and reddish-brown *mtumbati*-wood (*Pterocarpus angolensis*). It is carved from one piece of wood. The top part or “head” of the *luliimba* is solid and so is the part of the body where the keys are inserted. The

³ The main focus of my research was on the orature of the Mwera (Reuster-Jahn 2002).

resonator box is hollowed out from the back. The back is then closed by a cover made from the same wood, which is nailed to the body. Some instruments have a second cover at the front side of the box resonator. The *luliimba* has a number of sound holes. All the instruments I studied have three holes at the front side and no holes at the back and the other sides. At the middle of the upper part (the soundboard) there is a row of three to five holes, and three or four further holes are arranged below them. The holes are bored by using a local drill (*mpeu, mi-*). The keys are made from iron by a blacksmith. Their shape is shown in Figure 2b. At their broadest part they are bent in an angle of about 70° and inserted downwards into the solid part of the body.⁴ The musicians stressed that the keys should not project into the hollow part, otherwise they would not yield a good sound. There are always seven keys, their average width being slightly less than one centimetre and their length varying between five and seven centimetres, depending on their pitch and the size of the instrument. Two metal lugs on the sides of the instrument serve to fasten a cord for carrying it. The backs of three out of the four lamellophones from Nachingwea District are a bit curved, but one is flat. The top part or “head” of all the instruments is more or less upright.⁵ The size of the instrument varies. The ones I examined in Nachingwea are between 12 and 17 cm wide and between 23 and 27 cm long.⁶ Some of the box resonators have a trapezoidal form with the broad end at the front side. One informant told me that his father had a very small *luliimba*, which was about half the size of the normal lamellophones, but he did not know why it was so small.

The four instruments from Nachingwea District which I have studied are quite similar to each other with regard to their size and shape. They also resemble very much the lamellophone acquired by Margot Dias from a Makonde carver in 1958 (Dias 1982:162). Yet the collection of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin comprises some instruments of different appearance. Some of these instruments which were collected before 1914 have a flat head. The number and arrangement of the sound holes of some instruments is also very different from the recent Mwera lamellophones. These differences could be due to a change over time or to regional sub-types. Dias pointed to the fact that the Makonde/Mwera lamellophones are of high quality and beauty and therefore require high carving skill. According to my informants a lamellophone is manufactured in cooperation between the carver and a blacksmith, who makes the keys and also tunes them. The decorations are made by the carver, but the owners sometimes add more. Decorations consist mainly of lines and crosses. Only one instrument was not decorated at all. I was told that recently there is only one man in the area who is able to manufacture a

⁴ This is different from some older instruments at the Voelkerkundemuseum in Berlin, whose metal keys are broadest at their free end (Kubik 1998:197-203).

⁵ This is not always the case with the Makonde/Mwera type of lamellophone. Out of eight lamellophones in the Berlin collection six have a flat head part.

⁶ In the Berlin collection most instruments are longer (about 30 cm) but narrower (about 10 cm).

luliimba. He is a blacksmith who also does the carving of the instruments. Unfortunately, I was not able to get in contact with him.

There are modifications of the instruments, according to the individual taste of the owner. The deceased *luliimba*-player from Lionja had put tuning wax (*nbebe*,⁷ *mi-*) on the back of his instrument. This was explained by his son as a means to “soften” or “lower” the voice of the *luliimba* (Swahili: *kutuliza sauti*). The musician had also used a buzzer to increase the sound (Swahili: *kupaza sauti*). It consisted of a string with a rounded piece of a broken clay pot and a piece of iron. The string had been fastened to the lugs and was put on top of the resonator box while playing. Depending on where he put it, the player could vary its effect. The buzzer had been removed after the instrument was kept by the deceased musician’s son.



Figure 1. Tuning wax at the back of *luliimba* of Mzee Nakeru (photo by author, Lionja, 1999).

⁷ The letter b represents the voiced bilabial fricative β , except before w and after m, where it is realised as b.

Mwera nomenclature of the parts of the *luliimba*

Part of the instrument	Mwera term	Literal meaning
Top part	<i>ntwe</i> (Pl. <i>mitwe</i>)	head
Back	<i>kungoongo kwa luliimba</i>	on the back of the <i>luliimba</i>
Front side	<i>kucitaako kwa luliimba</i>	on the buttocks of the <i>luliimba</i>
Cavity	<i>mbaanda</i>	cavity
Sound holes	<i>malaanga</i> (Sg. <i>lilaanga</i>)	hole; the holes are said to let the sound out of the instrument. Informants compared them to the holes in radio loudspeakers.
Keys	<i>meeno</i> (Sg. <i>liino</i>)	teeth
Carrying cord	<i>lukobeelo</i> (Pl. <i>ngobeelo</i>)	carrying cord

The parts of the *luliimba* are named in anthropomorphic terms. The instrument is perceived as having a head, teeth, a back and buttocks, revealing a clear concept of top and bottom.

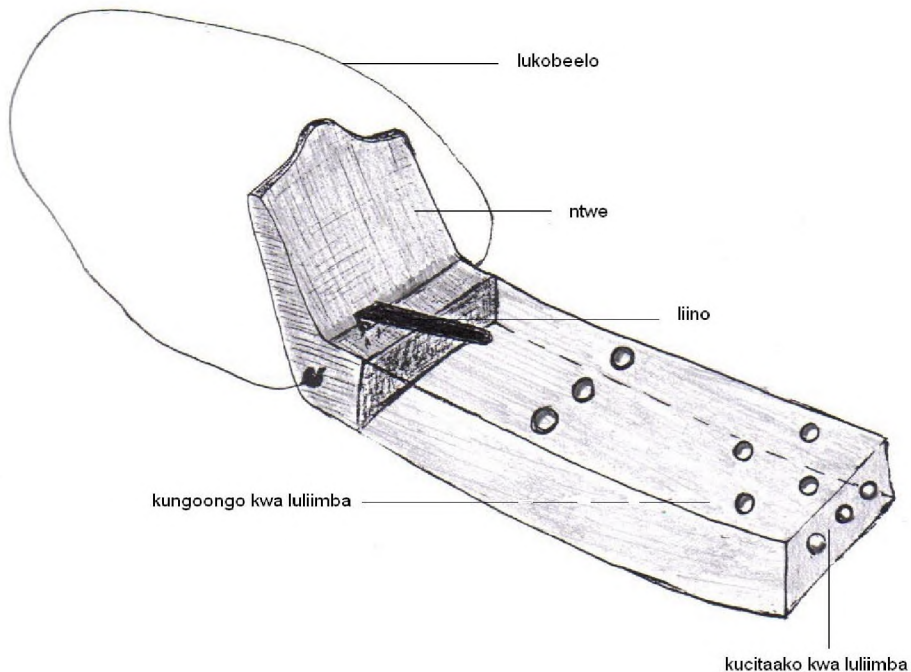


Figure 2a. Schematic drawing of a *luliimba*

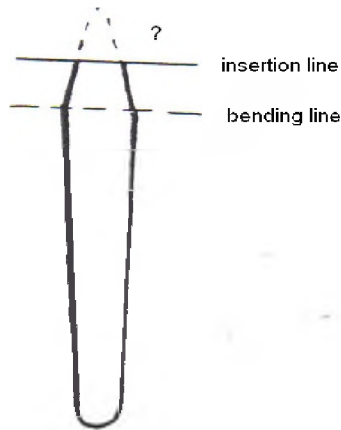


Figure 2b. Shape of a key

The tuning layout of the *luliimba*

A *luliimba* has seven metal keys which are arranged in the form of a V. The lowest key is in the middle (see Figure 3). From this key the scale proceeds in a zig-zag way: 4 > 3 > 5 > 2 > 6 > 1 > 7. The tuning layouts of the four lamellophones I studied in Nachingwea were different (see Figure 4), although two at a time were similarly tuned (Figures 4.1. and 4.2, and 4.3 and 4.4 respectively). For all of them the intervals between the keys 4 and 1 and the keys 3 and 7 consist of an octave or at least nearly an octave.⁸ The existence of similar tuning layouts might point to local layout-pattern.

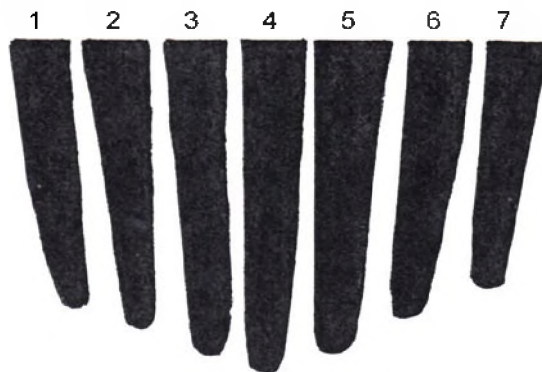


Figure 3. Arrangement of keys (*luliimba* of Mzee Maji ya Moto.
(For tuning layout see Figure 4.4 on page 12)

⁸ The notation of the layouts in picture 4 shall give an impression of the intervals between the sounds, and allow comparison between the tuning of the four lamellophones.

Figure 4.1. Tuning layout: *Luliimba* of Mzee Nakeru (Lionja)

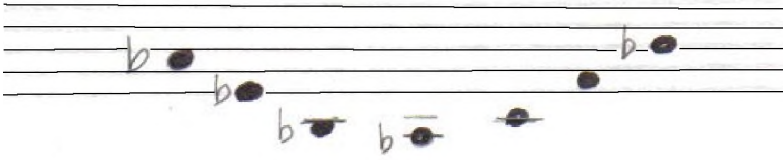


Figure 4.2. Tuning layout: *Luliimba* of Mzee Makwinya (Ruponda)

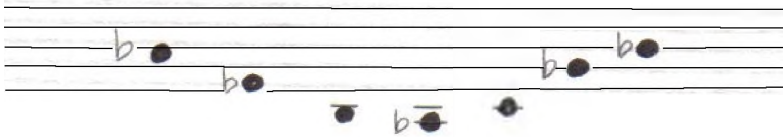


Figure 4.3. Tuning layout: *Luliimba* of Mzee Ismail (Kipara)

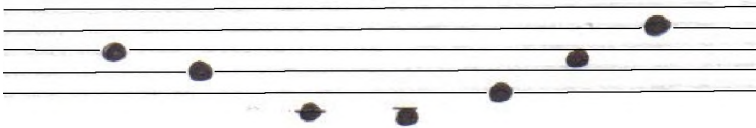


Figure 4.4. Tuning layout: *Luliimba* of Mzee Maji ya Moto (Ntila)



Playing technique

All players strike the keys with their thumbs. The right thumb plays the four keys on the right and the left thumb the three keys on the left. There is no crossing of fingers. The index fingers are put under the lateral keys and strike these from beneath (Figure 5). In the playing technique some individual variations can be observed which may be

interpreted as effects of the decline of the art of playing. Mzee⁹ Ismail from Kipara put his left index finger upon the left keys as if to stop the vibration (Figure 6). One player said that the right thumb is calling and the left is responding, but others insisted that there is no leading voice. I did not observe that the holes were covered to produce wow-effects, a technique used in the playing of the *likembe* type of lamellophone (cf. Kubik 1998:63). My informants denied this use of the sound-holes. According to them the holes are just outlets for the voice of the *luliimba* (Sw. *yanasaidia kutoa sauti* “they help to let the voice out”). The way of holding the *luliimba* also seems to have changed recently. Mzee Ismail held his *luliimba* with only the ring-finger from below while the other fingers were put above the resonator box (Figure 6). However, the players I could actually observe in 1999 all held the *luliimba* with three fingers below each side. The *luliimba* can be played while standing or walking, sitting on a chair or squatting on the ground.



Figure 5. *Luliimba* of the late Mzee Nakeru played by his son, Mr. Kilian Lijembu, from Chimbendenga, Nachingwea District. Note buzzer on top of resonator table. The head has been broken, originally it had the typical roof-like shape (photo by author, Lionja, 1999).



Figure 6. Mzee Ismail playing his *luliimba* in Kipara (photo by author, Kipara, 1987).

⁹ *Mzee* (old man) is a respectful way of addressing old men in Swahili.

Contexts and occasions of performance

There are three kinds of occasions when the *luliimba* is played: 1) while walking, 2) as pastime, 3) at a special event called *nngoma ja luliimba* or *ukana gwa luliimba* (“the *nngoma*¹⁰ of the *luliimba*” or “the beer of the *luliimba*”). *Luliimba* players used to play their instrument while walking long distances. In their pastime they usually played it just to entertain themselves. The special or great event was the *nngoma ja luliimba* or *ukana gwa luliimba*, almost never performed nowadays, but which is well remembered by older people. It was a public performance that lasted the whole night until the next morning. It seems that this event had a secular character, and was not connected to any ritual or spiritual context. However, it must have been a joint venture which demanded some organisation and coordination. People brewed beer and built a *liteteele*, a beer stand. One or several *luliimba* players were invited. It is well possible that there was a competitive element present in the performance (*cf.* Gunderson & Barz 2000). The players fastened rattles to their ankles. They played the *luliimba*, danced, and sang. They were accompanied by the small drum *cingaanga* and the *ngwacala*, which consists of two bamboo logs or a pestle, which is hit with two sticks. If the *luliimba* player could not sing well, singing was performed by someone else who was known as a good singer. The other performance participants sang the chorus and joined in the dancing.



Figure 7. Mzee Nakeru's son's *nngoma ja luliimba* ensemble: *luliimba*, *cingaanga*, *ngwacala*. Singer standing on left, *ngwacala* bamboo sticks on ground at right (photo by author, Lionja, 1999).

¹⁰ The term *nngoma* in Mwera as in Swahili has a broad meaning. It refers to musical events in general, including singing and dancing.

Mzee Nakeru was a famous musician who was invited by people to their festivities and who organised others at his own compound. During my visit in Lionja in 1999 a small *nngoma ja luliimba* was organised for me in the compound of a friend of mine, during the day. Since Mzee Nakeru had died, his son, who had inherited his *luliimba*, came from his village to play the lamellophone. Because he did not sing, an old friend of his father sang the songs and danced. A *cingaanga* (drum) and a *ngwacala* (bamboo sticks) accompanied the music (Figure 7). The songs of the late Mzee Nakeru were played and sung. This performance was recorded on video.

The musicians

The two musicians, Mzee Nakeru and Mzee Ismail, whom I visited in 1987, were famous for their music. Both were over 60 years old. A third player, Mzee Makwinya, whom I visited in 1999 was even older and did not use his *luliimba* at public events any more.

Mzee Ismail from Kipara was a calm man with a somewhat melancholic air. The pieces he played were soft and he sang only two of them. He played and sang solo, and only one piece was accompanied by percussion. This was probably due to the recording situation, but he did not seem to be a man to entertain large audiences. The themes of his pieces consisted of a comment on tax paying, a prayer to God, and songs on the relationship between husband and wife, as follows:

- 1) I'm chased by the police when they find me not having paid the tax.
- 2) God give us maize, God give us sorghum.
- 3) My wife, I'm going on a journey.
- 4) When I come home from my journey, I ask my wife to cook *ugali*¹¹ for me.

Mzee Nakeru from Lionja was a famous musician. I was told two different versions about his career. His son told the following story: The *luliimba* of Mzee Nakeru belonged to his father, who was married in Lionja. The young Nakeru used to play his father's instrument secretly but one day he was discovered by his mother. She told her husband about the matter. He did not scold his son but took him by surprise another time when he was playing. Since he was pleased with the music he allowed his son to use the instrument. According to this informant the *luliimba* was made in the 1950s. Another version told in the village goes like this: Mzee Nakeru's father was not a player of the *luliimba*. The young Nakeru liked the music and observed the musicians when playing. On those occasions he even learned to play himself. Then he had to manufacture his own *luliimba*. Because he became famous, people liked to invite him when performing a *nngoma*. He was not a player of the xylophone (*mangubila*). When I visited him in October 1987, Mzee Nakeru played the *luliimba* and sang. Unlike the other players he used a buzzer, which he put on top of the resonator table, and he was accompanied by

¹¹ A stiff porridge made from maize-, sorghum- or cassava-flour.

ngwacala-percussion. Furthermore, there was a chorus, which responded to his songs. It was a very lively performance. The themes of his songs were:

- 1) *Jumwana jwa jigala namwene papali pagona nng'ungu* (Why should my child sleep beneath the roof?).
- 2) *Ndembo ja ntimbo* (The elephant of greed). The song tells the story of a hunting expedition. The hunters who shot the elephant did not give the other participants a share because they were greedy.
- 3) A song from the initiation school.
- 4) *Cikandenga cabwi*. A song about sorcerers.
- 5) *Ngwete akangu aPaimene* (I have a wife, [her name is] Paimene). A song about a jealous wife.
- 6) *AnaNkuchika*. A song about a leader of former times, called Nkuchika.
- 7) *Ajetu bakulya matandi* (Our friend eats the fruits of the sausage tree).



Figure 8. Mzee Makwinya playing *luliimba* (photo by Author, Ruponda, 1999).

In 1999, I visited Mzee Makwinya in the village of Ruponda. He was quite old, as was his *luliimba*. Its head had been broken and repaired and termites had bored their holes in it. Mzee Makwinya's fingertips were a bit crippled but he still played nicely (Figure 8). He did not sing. At the end of the visit he even played some pieces on the

xylophone together with another man (see section on the relation of lamellophone and xylophone on page 18).

Inheritance

The *luliimba* is played by men and it is one of their sons who normally inherits the instrument. This is noteworthy since the Mwera have matrilineal descent and many items are inherited in the maternal line.¹² The owners whom I interviewed stated they received the *luliimba* from their fathers who, in turn, had received it from their fathers. Mzee Makwinya said that he had inherited it from his grandfather. The owners have to keep and preserve their instrument for their own sons and grandsons. Since the Mwera traditionally have the rule of uxori-local marital residence this means that the instruments move from one village to another when they are inherited, and the songs probably do so as well. Mzee Nakeru married in the village of Chimbendenga, but in his old age returned to his home village Lionja. When he died, his *luliimba* was handed over to his son from Chimbendenga who said that he in turn will give it to one of his sons, who learned from their grandfather, Mzee Nakeru, how to play it. The oldest musician, Mzee Makwinya from Ruyinda had received his *luliimba* from his grandfather who in turn had received it from his father. This instrument seemed to be older than the others, since it was quite worn. Mzee Maji ya Moto from Ntila got his *luliimba* from his father in Mnacho, who had got it from his father. He himself (Mzee Maji ya Moto) could not play it.

The heir of the instrument is obliged to remember the former owner by playing his instrument and singing his songs, especially if he was skilled and famous. A story shall illustrate this. When Mzee Nakeru died in 1999 his *luliimba* was left in his shelter-hut in the fields and nobody took notice of it. But soon after his death his eldest son fell ill. Then one night the second son dreamt of the *luliimba*. He took this as a message from his deceased father's spirit, that he was not pleased by the negligence of his instrument. The eldest brother agreed that the one who had the dream should fetch the *luliimba* and keep it. He did so and played it in memoriam of his father, and the eldest brother recovered. When the ceremony of *matanga*¹³ was performed, the *luliimba* was officially handed over to the brother who had had the dream. He was told that he shall be the custodian of the instrument. He must play it, but it is not his private property. If somebody from the family wants to play it, he must give it to him. He affirmed that he plays the instrument at least once a week. He said that if he forgets to do so, he will get "a slap in the face" from the spirit of the deceased. It is common practise that a skilled musician or dancer must be remembered by performing his art. That is a further reason why the owners should not be pushed by collectors or researchers to sell their instruments. Women normally do not play the *luliimba* and are excluded from its inheritance. Mzee Nakeru

¹² Each Mwera belongs to his or her *cipinga* (matrilineage), but there are also subsidiary patrilineages (*cilagwa*). Members of the same *cilagwa* are excluded from marriage.

¹³ A commemoration ceremony. It takes place 40 days after the death of the deceased.

had a daughter who was the only one among his children who took real interest in playing the instrument and consequently learned it from her father. But she did not inherit the instrument. Unfortunately, she lives far away and could not come to play the instrument during my stay.

Luliimba and mangubila (lamellophone and xylophone)

In the Mwera area the lamellophone exists beside the xylophone. Whereas the playing of the lamellophone is an individual matter reserved for men, the playing of the xylophone is one of matrilineages (*cipinga, ipinga*). There are only certain lineages who practise the playing of the xylophone. Women are not excluded. The name of the xylophone in Mwera is *mangubila*, in Swahili the Mwera call the lamellophone “*marimba ya mkono*” (marimba of the hand) and the xylophone “*marimba ya vibao*” (marimba of wooden keys).



Figure 9. Ms. Abdalla and a young man playing 7-keyed *mangubila* in Nditi, 1987 (photo by author).

The *mangubila* consists of seven, eight or nine keys made from the same wood as the body of the *luliimba* (*Pterocarpus angolensis*). These keys are placed upon two banana-stems and fixed at one side by small sticks through holes in the keys. On the other side the keys are separated from each other by similar sticks. Sometimes a bundle of grass is put between the stems and the keys. It is played by two musicians, one on each side. One player is leading (*kuimba*, “to sing”), the other is “answering” (*kujiticia*).

The answering voice starts before the leading voice by playing one sequence of its part (*kuomola*). There is at least one piece which is played on both instruments, namely “*Cancuupi akunakana buli?*” (How can the little bird get fat?). Mzee Makwinya from Ruponda played it on his *luliimba*. I had recorded the same piece played on the xylophone (*mangubila*) in Nditi (Nachingwea District), about 30 km away from Ruponda, in 1987 (Figure 9). Mzee Makwinya also was able to play it on the xylophone, together with another player (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Mzee Makwinya playing “*Cancuupi akunakana buli?*” on 8-keyed *mangubila* in Ruponda, 1999 (photo by author).

Conclusion

The lamellophone of the Makonde/Mwera type has seven iron keys that are fixed and therefore their tuning cannot be changed. The instrument is played by men and is inherited in the paternal line. A kind of relationship seems to exist with the xylophone, since at least one piece of music was played on both instruments. However, the *luliimba* lamellophone and its music are about to disappear, since there are only few old men left who are able to play it. Therefore, questions regarding the manufacturing of the instrument as well as the transmission of playing techniques, and musical pieces and songs might never be answered.

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