

Climate change and anthropogenic pollution may seem to be issues that are far removed from the world of music studies. But rising seas, species extinctions, resource depletion, and toxic environments are beginning to affect music praxes throughout the world, and these disruptions will only intensify with time. Many music scholars have begun to acknowledge this somber fact.¹⁶ As we all come to terms with inhospitable emergent realities and the multiplex precariousities they engender, we will need new perspectives that render our familiar objects and processes—music, sound, voice, listening, performance, storytelling—productively strange. This is where projects like *ESC*, and the sound art it features, make their greatest contribution. Rather than providing yet another list of anthropocenic atrocities or explication of the causes of climate change, they powerfully evoke the uncanny *feel* of the era we have entered: an era of fragile interconnectedness, dark tentacular energies, and the specter of things (species, habitats, epistemologies, radio broadcasts) that have been or will soon be lost. These losses are audible only if one has an “ecological ear,” and cultivating such an ear is what *ESC* was designed to do.

J. MARTIN DAUGHTRY

Sekuru’s Stories. Sekuru Tute Chigamba and Jennifer Kyker. URL: <https://sekuru.org/>

In his 1964 publication *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, Bruno Nettl suggested musical biographies as a way of exploring the articulations of music and social life. His idea was that people would tell their life stories by inserting the performances of songs or pieces that fit within those chronologies or were recalled through the telling—later to be transcribed/described in the written text by the ethnomusicologist. As in any good biography or autobiography, a much larger picture of the society and, in Nettl’s conception, of musical lifeways would emerge. Such is the case with *Sekuru’s Stories*, which is in turn autobiography, biography, and musical ethnography coauthored by famed Zimbabwean mbira musician Sekuru Tute Chigamba and North

16. See, for example, Rebecca Dirksen, “Haiti’s Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred,” *Ethnomusicology* 63, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 43–77; Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music after Fukushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Helen Rees, “Environmental Crisis, Culture Loss, and a New Musical Aesthetic: China’s ‘Original Ecology Folksongs’ in Theory and Practice,” *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 53–88; Matt Saka-keny, *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and Jessica A. Schwartz, “A ‘Voice to Sing’: Rongelapese Musical Activism and the Production of Nuclear Knowledge,” *Music and Politics* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2012), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/9460447.0006.101/-voice-to-sing-rongelapese-musical-activism?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

American ethnomusicologist Jennifer Kyker.¹ When writing in 1964, Nettl could not have imagined how fully his conception would be realized in a digital public humanities project—what Kyker calls a “born-digital monograph.”

Mr. Chigamba (b. 1939) is an excellent choice for a project of this kind. In many ways he is typical of his generation. His father was deeply engaged in Shona spiritual matters as a “translator” and go-between for a particular spirit and the people who depended on that spirit. He was a skilled drummer and Chigamba’s mother was a skilled singer and dancer; thus he grew up with indigenous Shona music and spirituality. His father also worked as a cook on a white farm and Chigamba experienced the effects of colonialism and settler (read European) practices in his early life; for instance, he learned guitar as a boy. He then migrated to the capital city of Harare (then officially Salisbury) in 1962 to live and work but went back and forth between the city and the rural areas. So, like many, he had a foot in both worlds.

But to a greater extent than many, Chigamba remained dedicated to indigenous Shona lifeways and music throughout his life and became a repository of indigenous knowledge as well as an innovator in regard to Shona practices. As Chigamba tells us, after learning guitar in his youth he began teaching himself to play mbira in 1965 from radio broadcasts. He then turned to making mbira as an occupation, began composing mbira pieces, and finally traveled the world performing while continuing to take part in spirit possession ceremonies and other events in Zimbabwe. He plays with a number of family members and friends at home and has had many students from home and abroad. That he is now addressed with the honorific title “Sekuru” (grandfather) indicates the esteem in which he is held. I studied mbira with and interviewed Chigamba in the early to mid-1990s as part of my research, and found him to be a particularly generous, forthcoming, and honest teacher. Kyker is also unusual in her dedication to and depth of understanding of Shona society and musical practices. I was surprised—and, having my own daughter, somewhat scandalized—when she told me that she convinced her mother to let her travel alone to Zimbabwe at age fifteen to study mbira. She has been working with Chigamba since that time (1995), and the closeness of their relationship is evident in the work they have produced.

This digital monograph is divided into six sections akin to chapters plus appendix: “Intro,” “Early Years,” “Musical Life” (that is, how music came into Chigamba’s life), “Independence” (post-1980), “Mbira,” “Ancestors,” and “Explore” (see figure 1). The general introduction, written by Kyker, is a simple statement of what is to come with suggestions as to how the project may be used. The final “Explore” section includes recordings and videos of different instruments and pieces—some newly presented, others previously introduced—as well as photographs and maps. This section is rich in materials and can be easily accessed as one goes through the text to learn more

1. <https://sekuru.org/>, accessed February 2020.

SEKURU'S STORIES

INTRO EARLY YEARS MUSICAL LIFE INDEPENDENCE MBIRA ANCESTORS EXPLORE



Sekuru's Stories is a digital public humanities project featuring the renowned Zimbabwean mbira player, oral historian, and ritual specialist Sekuru Tute Chigamba. Bringing Sekuru Chigamba's oral narratives, or *nhorooondo*, together with recordings, photographs, and maps, the project presents Zimbabwean musical and cultural heritage in an interactive format. Use the navigation menu to read Sekuru's Stories, or explore the site through the mediums of image, sound, and an interactive map.



Figure 1 Screenshot from Sekuru's Stories, showing the home page, accessed March 17, 2020, <https://sekuru.org/home/>. This figure appears in color in the online version of the **Journal**.

about a given place, person, instrument, or song mentioned earlier in the stories. The “Early Years,” “Musical Life,” and “Independence” sections are arranged chronologically, taking us from Chigamba's early childhood to adulthood and Zimbabwe's path toward independence. Each of the main sections (including “Mbira” and “Ancestors”) begins with an introduction by Kyker, while the main body, divided into subsections, comprises Chigamba's stories in his own words. Throughout his narratives, references to songs or instruments are provided with links to audio, video, and related sections elsewhere in the project (Nettl's dream musical [auto]biography); photographs are also included throughout. In the sections from “Early Years” to “Mbira,” Chigamba's stories are followed by Kyker's often much-needed summary, explanation, and analysis of what he has said. “Ancestors” is Chigamba's history of the migrations that gave rise to the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

At once a strength and a difficulty, reading Chigamba's narratives is like doing original ethnographic research. The strength is that we get a sense of the topics, issues, beliefs, and images that are important to him. The ways he connects different aspects of a story and the examples he uses to explain things are in themselves instructive about and evocative of a worldview unique to him and others in Zimbabwe. The difficulty is that references are sometimes obscure and not explained. To illustrate the tenor and style of Chigamba's stories, I quote one at some length in its original format. In the "Independence" section, there is a subsection entitled "Praying for Rain" (see figure 2). Here Chigamba tells us,

There was a ceremony organized by Mutumwa [a spirit introduced in the next subsection], because the drought was keeping on. And that was in 1984. . . .

We went to his home and we played mbira in an open space where the sun shone. There were no clouds, and there was no shade. He said, "Sit there. If you want rain, sit and play mbira there." And we sat down and played mbira there. We played mbira until he said, "Okay, you can stop."

There were four people there, including him. And he said, "Now we will sing for rain." They were singing their church songs. You know, we can say they were Christian songs, but the words were not relating to Christianity. They were singing "Zadzai Hova Nemvura."

[As shown in figure 2, a recording of Chigamba singing this song is embedded at this point, with Shona and English song text provided: "Zadzai hova nemvura" / "Fill the streams with water"; "Nyika nyika nemvura" / "The entire nation, with water."]

Then he asked someone from the group to go and take a ladle. There was no water inside—he tipped it over, and nothing came out. So as they were singing, he was tipping the ladle. They did that four times. He tried to pour out water, but there was nothing inside. He tried again, and there was nothing. But the third time water came out, and the fourth time water came out again.

He said, "Now you will have rain." And then we stopped, and the very same day, by three o'clock, the rain started to fall. So that's when we believed that the rain had come. And then we came back to Harare.

Especially when we were living in Rushinga, sometimes we would see, "Ah, there's no rain. Our crops are withering, so what should we do?" We used to sing "Zadzai Hova Nemvura." And after a day or two, the rain would come.

Chigamba speaks naturally, often as if he were talking to people with a deep knowledge of Zimbabwean society, culture, and geography, making allusions or connections between stories that would not be easily understood by outsiders. It is in such cases that Kyker's follow-up commentary is so valuable. She also succeeds in tying the issues raised by Chigamba to the broader ethnographic and ethnomusicological literature and contextualizing the

Praying for Rain



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For three or four years, people did not have enough rain. In 1980 we had enough rain, and in 1981 it was enough. But then the drought started in 1982. And in '83, '84, '85, it was difficult. We had almost a continuous drought.

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Sekuru Chigamba sings "Zadzai Hova Nemvura"

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Figure 2 Screenshot from Sekuru's Stories, showing the beginning of "Praying for Rain" (a subsection of the "Independence" section), accessed March 17, 2020, <https://sekuru.org/praying-for-rain/>. This figure appears in color in the online version of the **Journal**.

significance of the new insights and knowledge added by Chigamba's commentary. Perhaps because (I presume) he was speaking to Kyker, he does not always bother to explain Shona terms that will be familiar to anyone who knows something about Zimbabwe—for example, “sadza” (corn mush), “sahwira” (wise counselor), and “mujibhas” (independence fighters). As someone deeply enculturated, Kyker sometimes misses these herself in her follow-up discussions. Since this might prove a problem for readers who do not have such knowledge, adding a glossary to the “Explore” section would be helpful.

As another useful addition, Kyker and Chigamba could add a discussion to the “Intro” section in which they explain the processes by which the stories and the section/subsection topics were selected, ordered, and edited—who did what and why? It would be interesting to have a statement from each coauthor about her/his particular goals for the project. Understanding how the work transpired would greatly help us to read and use it.

In regard to these suggestions, one of the interesting things about reviewing a digital monograph (my first), as opposed to a printed book, is that the project can be ongoing. On the home page, the authors invite readers to “subscribe to receive notifications about new additions,” adding, “We also welcome your feedback as Sekuru's Stories is developed.” While scholarly research and publication is always interactive to some degree, digital publication greatly expands this potential, and these authors seem to welcome this.

The topics covered in Chigamba's life stories are numerous, varied, and sometimes surprising, and seem directed by what is significant to him. They include plants and food preparation during a time of drought; musical instruments not often mentioned in the Zimbabwean musicological literature, such as the *Kambuya-mbuya* (ground bow) used during herding; relations between different types of spirits; particular performances that he valued; dreams; family relations, especially between children and elders; times of suffering during the colonial and independence periods; and many others. In addition, the sections and subsections of Chigamba's narratives are often quite short, such that we have a host of quick references that sometimes cry out for more exploration and interpretation even beyond what Kyker's explanations can provide. (I would guess that the relative lengths of the two authors' contributions were designed so that Chigamba's voice remains paramount and is not dwarfed by scholarly commentary.)

The mbira tradition receives the most sustained attention—its origins, its repertoire, the meaning of songs, processes of composition, different names for mbira and other Zimbabwean lamellophones, instrument building, and the status and activities of mbira players, among other issues. Mbira music is often described in the literature as conservative, in that the ceremonial songs that are most likely to succeed in attracting spirits into their mediums are those that the ancestors knew and liked when living. As a distinct feature of this work, however, Chigamba and Kyker emphasize innovation in terms of

new tunings, new compositions, and new contexts of performance. Here there is a good explanation of the way new pieces become acceptable in ceremonial contexts and how new tunings and instrumental combinations come about.

The readership for this publication is potentially as varied as the topics broached, as are approaches to its use. The project can be read as a sequential text, as one would a book, or readers can home in on certain sections of particular interest. Geographers are introduced to a local conception of historic African migrations (in the “Ancestors” section), and ethnobotanists to plants and their names and uses (in “The Year of Drought” and “Threshing Songs” subsections of “Early Years”). Chigamba offers his take on relationships between spirits, spirit mediums, and political chiefs, a common topic among anthropologists. For scholars and students interested in music-and-gender issues, there is rich material in Chigamba’s observations about women’s musical activities, especially within his family, and as emphasized in Kyker’s commentary. Folklorists interested in folk tales and their telling will find examples. Mbira players, and scholars interested in this instrument, will be rewarded with Chigamba’s explanations of the meaning of canonic pieces, the multiple recordings of mbira pieces, the discussion of the origins and development of the mbira in relation to other lamellophones, the consideration of names for the instrument, and descriptions of the processes of composing and of making mbira, among many other topics. In addition, this project provides a good (although briefer) overview of a number of Zimbabwean musical traditions and instruments. Adding an index would facilitate accessing this array of material for readers with different interests.

As I have noted, newcomers may find some of Chigamba’s commentary rather esoteric. Yet Kyker succeeds in keeping her writing accessible for non-specialists, even explaining rather basic aspects of the mbira and various other issues. The photos, recordings, videos, and maps found in the “Explore” section and throughout the site may be readily accessed independently of the narrative. So, in addition to mbira players and specialist readerships from various disciplines, I can imagine primary and secondary school teachers being able to use material on the site in their classrooms—folk tales told to children, descriptions of a child’s life in Zimbabwe, photos and videos, discussions of relations between children and their elders. An innovative feature of this publication, and one that indicates the authors’ desire that it be widely useful abroad as well as in Zimbabwe, is that Chigamba’s texts can be read in Shona at the click of a mouse—another example of the ability of born-digital work to lower access barriers and reach across language differences. All the sections of the site are listed at the head of each section, making movement between them quick and easy.

Sekuru’s Stories, free and available to anyone, anywhere, who has access to the Internet, is a tremendous resource. Common questions (“What is the meaning of a particular mbira song?” “What are the contexts for *chipendani*

musical bow performance?") are answered, and in other cases, an obscure comment from Chigamba may spur the beginning of a whole new line of research. The late, great, Bruno Nettl would be tickled to encounter this "musical biography" (he was a particular fan of mbira). It is my hope that the coauthors continue to develop what they have started here in the interactive spirit that pervades this work.

THOMAS TURINO