

Trabing

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# Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing



## The African Walking Piano

I ran on to a native of the Kikuyu country in Kenya one afternoon last week and became fascinated with a little box from which he urged strange music.

It made strong plunking, dissonant sounds that welled up visions of thick jungle, wild plains and isolated, thatched-roofed villages.

The musician was a thin, delicate featured man named George Kamau, his startling white smile starkly contrasted with his black African skin, much darker than the average American Negro's.

George is a product of modern Africa, still the land of great contrasts.

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He holds a degree in economics from the University of California at Berkeley.

His wife is a recent graduate in social science from San Jose State college.

He is still in the states, because all their money was spent on education and now they haven't quite enough to get back home after five years here.

But they are working on it, and one of their means of earning it is this little box called the "kidaba" which means "small tin box."

Over in Africa, he said, it is as common as the guitar is here.

The box is open on one end and on top are fastened 10 metal strips made from spring metal or any small scrap material.

"As kids we used to use bike spokes," he said. "They are held down under force and you can tune it by moving the 10 pieces back and forth.

"We play it by snapping the ends with the thumbs.

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He demonstrated and his thumbs flew like guitar picks.

"Over here someone has named them 'thumb piano' or 'hand piano'," he said. Some have tin wrapped around each piece to make vibrations.

George has some on sale at the Beholder's Eye on Soquel avenue for \$5 or \$6.

"People used to walk long distances in Africa and they

still do, and they carry these boxes with them to entertain themselves. You don't get so tired when you pass the time with music.

"Some say they are the original marimbas. I've made some 30 of them here."

George's father was a farmer, who never could have sent him to college.

It was his luck to have been placed in the hands of an Irish missionary at an early age, accounting for his mixed up British accent.

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He is 29 and will return to his people with deep ambitions to improve their lot.

His goal is to become a museum curator; to collect and preserve Africana before, in the headlong rush to westernize, the relics are lost, and with them the pride of the past.

This phase of his life has been a tremendous struggle. For the past four years he has worked as a night janitor at the university while getting his education by day.

He met his wife here, who appeared to come from the same village as he, and they now have a child.

"Your life here is very fast.

It seems to be a succession of crises. Your standards of living are so high that one has to keep running all the time to keep up.

"This is where we are different. In Africa our standards are lower, but the reward for this is relaxation.

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Kamau said he has run into the racial problem, especially when he changed places of residence. He lives in San Jose.

"People used to advise me to go live with my own people. I told them I didn't know what they meant, I have no people here.

"It is a strange thing, that when they hear my accent and see that I am from a foreign country, their attitude changes. It's like I suddenly have become a tourist," he said.

And then George picked up his kidaba, held it like a book, and played me some plucking music.

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