



The Uptake of Chromatic Marimbas by Learning Institutions in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Zimbabwe marimba has become a popular school musical instrument since it was designed at Kwanongoma College of Music in the early 1960s. Two types of marimbas played in Zimbabwe are diatonic and chromatic marimbas. Most of the scholars who researched the Zimbabwe marimba focused more on diatonic marimbas, and this study draws attention to the adoption of chromatic marimbas in learning institutions in Zimbabwe. The purpose of this article was to examine the uptake of chromatic marimbas in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities in Zimbabwe. This study explores the advantages marimba players get when performing on chromatic marimbas, while highlighting the limitations of diatonic marimbas. The researchers used qualitative research methods to carry out this study, targeting learning institutions that offer music as a subject, and marimbas as part of their practical performance curriculum. Interviews, document analysis, and participant observation were used as the data collection methods. Findings study show that the uptake of chromatic marimbas in Zimbabwean learning institutions is still very low, with most music departments still using the diatonic marimba sets. The researchers advocate that tertiary institutions equip trainee teachers and music specialist students with knowledge and skills to play chromatic marimbas, as this will enable them to disseminate these skills to their students after training. Chromatic marimba builders are encouraged to promote their sets by offering them to learning institutions at affordable prices for small profit margins that wield potential to attract more patronage.

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Introduction

The Zimbabwe marimba (also known as the Kwanongoma style marimba) was designed at Kwanongoma College of African Music in Bulawayo in the early 1960s, having been born out of scholarly inputs at Kwanongoma College of African Music (Maguraushe, 2024). It is believed that marimbas existed in Zimbabwe before they were brought for further development at Kwanongoma College of African Music. Axelsson (1981) states that the marimba existed in Zimbabwe during the time of the Mwenemutapa Kingdom (circa 14th-16th century). He adds that the instrument became extinct as an indigenous instrument due to colonialism and forced migrations. Also, Berliner (1993) asserts that the marimba was at one time a popular instrument among certain Shona groups. However, Tracey (2015) opposes the existence of marimba in the precolonial era, saying the absence of marimbas in Zimbabwe is the chief reason why this instrument was chosen to be developed as a new national instrument, because it had no ethnic affiliations. The Zimbabwe marimba later spread



into schools and community centres as a source of entertainment during functions (Maguraushe, 2017).

Robert Sibson, Josiya Siyembe Mathe, Leslie Williamson, Alport Mhlanga and Nelson Jones are the innovators who developed a national instrument that they intended to traverse racial and ethnic boundaries in the early 1960s. They adjusted the eleven-key Lozi *silimba* brought by Josiah Siyembe Mate to make the Zimbabwean marimba. From 1962, the subsequent development was done by Michael Bhule, who successfully built the first complete set of four diatonic marimbas at Kwanongoma. The Kwanongoma marimba set has a seventeen-key soprano and tenor in a diatonic C major scale with added F sharps, a nine-note baritone, and an eight-note bass (Maguraushe, 2017).

In 1962, Nelson Jones of Kwanongoma College of African Music built the first three diatonic marimbas. “He used imported California redwood for the keys and cardboard tubes for the resonators. These marimbas were not durable and consequently did not last very long because the wood was soft” (Maguraushe, 2017: 60). It seems Kwanongoma College of African Music made no further attempts to develop the chromatic marimba. The Zimbabwe marimba became popular in learning institutions in Zimbabwe and foreign countries, especially in Europe and the United States of America (Matiure, 2008).

In the post-colonial era, several workshops emerged that specialised in making marimbas. Some of these workshops constructed both the diatonic and the chromatic marimba. On the chromatic marimba, one can play a song in any major key and play any type of music. On a piano, there are black and white keys that are positioned to provide working material for music players. The movement of keys from the C key without skipping any black or white key to the next C gives the chromatic scale, and similarly, the chromatic marimbas that are made in that fashion (Mamvura, 2011). Despite the presence of chromatic marimba in Zimbabwe, the Kwanongoma diatonic marimba seems to be common in most of the learning institutions. Maguraushe (2017: 165) says, “Generally, the marimbas that are found in Zimbabwean schools, teachers’ colleges, polytechnic colleges, universities, and community-based ensembles are played in the keys of C Major and G Major.” A basic marimba set consists of soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass.



Figure 1: Diatonic/standard soprano and tenor marimbas (Picture by Mherembi, 2023)

Extended marimbas are an extension on the diatonic/standard marimba by means of adding a lower B and top D, C, E, making it a 21-key instrument (Fidelis Mherembi, personal communication, 2 March 2024). Chromatic marimbas have bars arranged in semitones, one after the other - the bars may be laid out like the piano keys or horizontally next to each other at the same level.



Figure 2: Chromatic soprano and tenor marimbas (Pictures by Manomano, 2023)

The quest to uncover the adoption of the chromatic marimba in Zimbabwean learning institutions motivated the researchers to carry out this study. This study investigated the advantages and challenges of using chromatic marimbas. At festivals such as Allied Arts, Tambarimba, Giamari, Tertiary Institutions Festival of Arts (TIFAZ), and Research and Intellectual Output, Science and Technology (RIO-SET) Expo, very few ensembles use the extended and chromatic marimbas. The researchers identified challenges related to the use of chromatic marimba in learning institutions in Zimbabwe and discussed possible solutions. The benefits of using chromatic marimbas and their manufacturers in Zimbabwe are identified.

The history of the marimba

The history of the marimba dates back to the 9th century and developed independently in Africa and Asia (Smith, 2020). The origin of the marimba is unclear, as many countries claim to be the origin of this instrument. Some scholars mention Africa and South America as the two continents where the marimba originated (Garfias, 1983; Rager, 2008; Tracey, 1948). However, Rager (2008) dismissed the idea of monopolising the origin of marimba because there is no evidence to prove the exact location of its first arrival. Smith (2020) noted the early existence of marimba in Africa and Asia. Musicologist Curt Sachs identified the leg, pit, log, table, and trough as key components of African marimba groups (Onyedum, 2021). For a leg marimba, a player had to sit down and lay wooden bars across the legs

and play. Later on, this was developed to become a pit marimba, which had wood bars laid across the hole in the ground. From a pit marimba, a log marimba was developed.



Figure 3: The Log marimba (Source: Moffor, 2011) <https://share.google/BAcFX1XdEFqW2q3eS>

According to Morais, the word Marimba is a Bantu word which is also related to the word Malimba. Marimba/ Malimba refers to the instruments with gourd resonators played by the Shangana-Ndau people who live on the coast of Mozambique, near the Save River. The Chopi tribe of Mozambique are said to have a similar instrument, which they call timbila in their native language. The instrument is also played by mallets made from crude rubber. They play the instrument as an ensemble, and the music is used to accompany dances at functions (Morais, 2021).



Figure 4: The Timbila of the Venda (Source: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage)

The Venda tribe of South Africa developed their unique type of marimba, which they call “mbila”. Their marimbas were described as massive instruments with a robust frame which can hold twenty keys. England (2019: 89) further described the structure of the mbila as follows:

Below each slab is a cucumber-shaped calabash, each of which has an opening cut at the stalk end. The calabashes are lashed to the frame, with the openings directly under the appropriate slab of wood. Near the closed end of each calabash, there is a small opening covered with pieces of spider web; this opening adds a buzzing sound to the tone of the instrument.



Figure 5: The Mbila of the Venda tribe (Source: Mugovhani, 2009)

<https://share.google/kMWqV9AIBKQIRlbmj>

Men mostly played the Venda marimba/mbila. However, girls were also taught. Most of the songs played were their traditional songs (England, 2019).

Additionally, the Chopi tribe had its type of marimba, which is different from the Venda's. The Chopi type of marimba is described as smaller than that of the Venda, although they have some similarity. England (2019: 90) described the Chopi as

The slabs of hardwood are tuned by cutting, lashed onto the fibres of a tree, and secured to a frame. The frame is a long piece of wood pierced with as many holes as the instrument has notes. Secured below the holes are resonators made from the shells of the fruit of the nsala tree. Each resonator has a small hole bored in its side, over which is secured by wax, small fruits of the rubber tree. The frame is secured to two leg pieces. The players use beaters tipped with lumps of raw rubber.

The Chopi people featured marimba on their important society occasions, such as big gatherings, and about thirty players would perform together.

Tracey made it clear that there were no marimbas in Zimbabwe except the small ones, which the Tonga people played. The Tonga played it in the fields to make the seeds grow and to keep birds and baboons away. This instrument only exists in the memories of old men (Tracey, 2004). However, Axelsson (1981) says the marimba existed in Zimbabwe during the time of the Mwenemutapa Kingdom (circa 14th-16th century) and became sidelined during colonialism and forced displacement of the local people. Also, Berliner (1993) asserts that the marimba was at one time a popular instrument among certain Shona groups.

Looking at the contradictions between Tracey, Axelson, and Berliner, it is possible that marimba was present in Zimbabwe at some point in the past. Tracey admitted the existence of the marimba among the Tonga people. Despite this small argument about the prior existence of marimba in Zimbabwe, all scholars agree that the Kwanongoma College of Music in Bulawayo designed the diatonic Zimbabwe marimba set. There were arguments for adopting traditional Zimbabwean scales, such as those found on the mbira, when it came to tuning the new instruments (Jones, 2012). However, the Western



diatonic scale eventually won out, and the Kwanongoma marimbas were produced in C major. F#s were added shortly thereafter to allow for playing in the key of G and its related modes (Moyo, 2022). The diatonic marimbas were successfully adopted in Zimbabwe and became very popular in learning institutions and communities.

It is not clear when and where the chromatic marimbas were first found in Zimbabwe. The influence of Western music theory has led to the building of chromatic marimbas that allow performers to play pieces in any key and venture into various musical genres. Chromatic marimbas are now being constructed following the chromatic principle. The marimba keys are laid out similarly to those on a piano, with sharp keys arranged to give musicians the full range of notes to create music by moving from one C key to the following C key without skipping any keys in between (Maguraushe, 2017). Brain, the leader of Zambezi Marimba Band, designed and made chromatic marimbas for his band (Hall, 2023). Zambezi Marimba Band is based in the United States of America and plays traditional African music. Although the band claims to be Zimbabwean, the credit for using chromatic marimba cannot be given to Zimbabwe because of its location.

Most of the studies on Zimbabwean marimba music focus on their history, their contribution to society and the education system, and the materials used in making the instrument. There is a dearth of literature on the development and manufacture of chromatic marimba in Zimbabwe. This research fills that niche by looking at the adoption of chromatic marimbas in learning institutions in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical framework

The Zimbabwe marimba is a modern tradition (Jones, 2012). Matiure (2008) calls it a mixture of outside physical models and local musical aesthetics that entangle with Western ideas to develop African music. In light of such a background, this study inclines towards Ortiz's (1947) concept of transculturation to characterise the history of the Zimbabwe marimba as one of significant and continuous infiltration by Western art music's theoretical concepts and culture into its formation. Ortiz uses the word transculturation, which carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomenon that aligns with the recent development of both diatonic and chromatic marimbas.

The study also adopts Swanwick's theory of music development, which can be used in the design of music education curricula (in this case, the marimba teaching programme) that integrates indigenous Zimbabwe marimba instrumental performance practices as part of the music content for schools in contemporary Zimbabwe. Marimba music performance within education programmes should provide learners with opportunities to experience real music-making activities if they were to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills (Swanwick, 1988). Swanwick's model transcends cultural barriers and applies to varied marimba performance teaching and learning contexts encountered in both elite and everyday schools where music is taught. Swanwick's model encompasses, among other concepts, the symbolic value of musical arts, thus making it applicable to the cause of expanding the existing content in marimba teaching. The music programme should create opportunities for learners to physically engage with new musical performance challenges rather than to regurgitate facts about music knowledge without creativity (Wanyama, 2006).

Methodology

This qualitative study (Allan, 2020) combined ethnography with archival research methods to collect data on the adoption of chromatic marimbas in learning institutions in Zimbabwe. Ethnographic data collection methods (document analysis, interviews and participant observation) were used to gather data on the adoption of chromatic marimbas in schools, colleges and universities in Zimbabwe. The researchers looked at written documents such as pictures, speeches, websites, newspapers and



marimba performance videos, which gave insight into the history of chromatic marimba and music in Zimbabwe. The researchers also searched on YouTube for clips of Zimbabwean marimba groups, specifically learning institutions.

The target group for this study included learning institutions and chromatic marimba manufacturers in Harare and the surrounding areas. Learning institutions were chosen for this study because they have the necessary information to answer the research questions of this study. The sample number for this study included ten purposively selected marimba tutors from schools, colleges and universities, and five marimba manufacturers located in and around Harare. The researchers also employed a snowballing, a reputation-based sampling technique (Audemard, 2020), in which initially selected marimba makers helped identify other marimba workshops with the potential to provide valuable data on the uptake of chromatic marimbas by learning institutions in Zimbabwe. There are several marimba construction companies in Zimbabwe, but not all of them make chromatic marimba. The workshops that make chromatic marimbas are; Kutinya Arts in Ashdown Park, Harare, owned by Nicholas Manomano; Giamari in Mudzimuirema, Marondera, run by Nyasha Zengeni; Yotinhira Arts in Cold Comfort, Harare, owned by Fidelis Mherembi; Transition Arts Workshop in Gweru heavy industrial site owned by Almon Moyo; and Tsoro Arts in Dzivarasekwa, Harare, owned by Jacob Mafuleni. GZU has recently ventured into the manufacturing of diatonic marimbas through its traditional music unit. The institution employed Wilson Machinga, a marimba builder who used to work at the Kwanongoma College of Music. Informal conversational interviews were conducted with these marimba builders, as well as marimba tutors.

Deductive data analysis was employed in this qualitative analysis because it enabled researchers to operate at a descriptive level, where observations were more closely aligned with participants' accounts (Ravindran, 2019). The observations and responses from interviewees made up the central theme on the popularity of chromatic marimbas in learning institutions. Popularity was categorised under the following emerging sub-themes: marimba construction companies' production and sales, marimba tutors' experiences, Allied Arts Festivals presentations, sets used in academic institutions, challenges and advantages of using chromatic marimbas.

Popularity of Chromatic Marimbas in Zimbabwe

Kutinya Arts has made and sold over fifty diatonic marimbas, six extended marimbas and three chromatic marimbas. One of the chromatic sets was bought by Harare International School. Yotinhira arts has sold diatonic marimba sets to more than one hundred institutions since 2009, eight extended, and two chromatic marimba sets upon receiving orders; one was bought by Midlands Christian College in Gweru and the other one by former Bhundu Boys member Kudashe Matimba (Fidelis Mherembi, personal communication, 13 July 2025). Besides making marimbas, they also conduct marimba workshops with marimba players and teachers. According to Almon Moyo (personal communication, 11 July 2025), Transition Arts has produced only one chromatic marimba since starting to manufacture marimbas, which an individual purchased. For the standard diatonic ones, they have sold more than thirty sets. Giamari has sold four diatonic marimbas and no chromatic marimbas. They have one set of chromatic marimbas in their workshop, which is yet to be purchased. According to Zengeni (personal communication, 30 June 2025), chromatic marimbas are not in demand like diatonic and extended marimbas. Tsoro Arts has sold fifteen diatonic marimba and no chromatic sets.

Responses by marimba tutors indicate that they are aware of the option to include chromatic marimba as part of the musical instruments offered in their classes. However, six of them confirmed that they have not physically seen them, and only four confirmed that they have witnessed chromatic marimba before. This shows that chromatic marimbas are not as standard as diatonic marimbas. In Zimbabwe,

music teachers are demanding marimba instruments due to the government's call for the inclusion of music as a subject in the heritage-based curriculum in both primary and secondary schools, and also as a way of appreciating marimba music. In line with Swanwick's (1988) theory of music development, marimba tutors and their learners might acquire the requisite skills to play chromatic marimbas, provided they regularly undertake a programme of rehearsals. It is through such interactions that they could develop an in-depth understanding of the interconnectivities of repetition, cadences, intonation, diction, and the balancing and blending of musical performances.

At the Allied Arts Festival, the researchers observed that only two schools brought chromatic marimbas. These are Nattie Junior School and Peter House College. The researchers visited Nattie Junior School in Dzivarasekwa and observed that the chromatic set of marimbas used at Nattie Junior School is unique. The set comprises eight pieces, which are two soprano, two alto, two tenor, one bass and one baritone. Most of the marimba sets, even the diatonic ones, do not include the alto marimba. Upon seeing this unique set of marimbas, the researchers sought to identify the manufacturer, and they were informed that the set was purchased from Nicholas Manomano. According to Manomano (personal communication, 5 June 2025), the purpose of having the alto marimba was to help those who cannot access the three registers on the marimba. The alto chromatic marimbas were designed to sit in between these three registers automatically. The first register spans from Lower C to the next C, the middle register ranges from G to G, and the upper register extends from middle C to the last C. Manomano explained that some of the marimba players do not mind splitting the registers specifically on the tenor marimbas. They play the duplicate keys in the same positions. Therefore, the alto marimba will solve this problem.

The bass and baritone marimbas used at Nattie Junior are extended. According to Manomano, it is not possible to have chromatic bass and baritone because of their size. The keys of these two marimbas are broader and longer, which is why adding the upper keys to make a chromatic marimba would make the baritone and bass too big and challenging to play. Also, the instruments will become too heavy to move from one point to another. Also, considering the size of the resonators used on the bass marimba, it is not possible to have another layer added on top. Because of this, the marimba manufacturer makes chromatic notes on the soprano and tenor marimba.



Figure 6: Nattie Junior School Chromatic Marimba Set (Picture by Masamba, 2024)



The researchers observed schools that were coming to perform marimba music at the 2024 National Institute of Allied Arts vocal and Eisteddfod¹. This vocal and Eisteddfod started with an African instrumental between 23rd February 2024 and 8th March 2024. School marimba bands were coming from different parts of Zimbabwe to perform at Prince Edward School. The researchers used that platform to carry out observations during the research. Below is the table that shows the results of the observations.

Table 1: Marimba types played at the Allied Arts Festival

Day	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Number of Schools with marimba bands	10	12	10	13	15
Number of schools with chromatic marimba	0	0	0	0	2
Number of schools with Diatonic marimba	10	12	10	13	14

The table above shows that on day one, there were 10 different schools with marimba bands, and none of them had chromatic marimbas. All the bands had a diatonic standard set of marimbas. Day number one was the first day of the festival. Most of the schools that participated on this particular day were from Harare, particularly schools that were close to the venue. Day number two was the fifth day of the festival, and there were twelve schools from different places. None of these schools had a Chromatic marimba. It was a mixture of bands with extended marimba and the standard set. Day number three was the 8th day of the festival, and day number four was the 12th day of the festival.

The fifth day was the final day of the Marimba festival. Schools participating in the cup challenge, along with others from different parts of Zimbabwe, were in attendance. A total of 15 schools were attended on this particular day, and only Nattie Junior and Peter House schools had chromatic marimba bands. These schools' marimba sets only had chromatic keys on the sopranos and tenors. On bass and baritone, they are diatonic marimba. According to Nyasha Zengeni (Personal communication, 21 June 2025), the Peter House marimba teacher, it is not necessary to have chromatic baritone and bass because when playing them, only root notes are used, and they are not found on the upper keys. They bought these chromatic marimbas from Tsoro Arts, owned by Jacob Mafuleni. The table shows that the total number of schools from day one to day five was sixty. Out of these sixty schools, only two had chromatic marimba sets.

¹ A competitive festival of music and poetry.



Figure 7: Peter House Marimba Band performing at 2024 NIAA competitions (Picture by Masamba)



Figure 8: Peter House Marimba Band (Picture by Masamba, 2024)

The researchers observed the marimba sets used in Zimbabwean universities. The University of Zimbabwe uses the Kwanongoma type of diatonic marimbas, despite the presence of extended marimba and chromatic marimba on the market. Africa University, through its affiliate Zimbabwe College of Music (ZCM) has the standard marimba set. Midlands State University students play the Kwanongoma type of marimba, with an extended baritone. Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) also

uses the same kind of marimba used at UZ and AU. There is no uptake of chromatic marimbas in tertiary learning institutions that offer music degrees in Zimbabwe.

Marimba sets are also played in colleges in Zimbabwe, where students are equipped with marimba teaching skills. Most of the teacher training colleges that offer marimba music were influenced by a cohort of students who trained at Kwanongoma College of Music in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who lecture at these colleges. Seke Teachers' College uses the diatonic standard set. Other teacher training colleges that use the same type of marimba are Morgenster, Madziwa, Mkoba, United College of Education, Masvingo, and Nyadire. Music Crossroads Academy offers a Diploma in Music and teaches marimba.



Figure 9: Chromatic marimbas used at Music Crossroads Academy (Picture by Masamba, 2024)

Challenges faced by chromatic marimba performers

Chromatic marimbas are very expensive. This is so because they demand almost double the materials used on the standard marimba. Materials needed include wooden keys, iron bars, resonator pipes, glue, varnish, and others. On a standard marimba, the manufacturer uses only 17 keys, but on the chromatic ones, they add about 15 more keys. This affects the pricing of the final product. Also, the time and labour taken to construct the whole set is more than what is needed when making the standard set. All these factors contribute to the cost charged on the complete set. The cost of the full standard diatonic marimba set is \$2500, while the chromatic marimba set costs \$4500. The three marimba makers interviewed indicated that learning institutions mostly purchase the standard marimba set because they cannot afford the chromatic marimba.

Chromatic marimbas are costly to maintain. This is because of the increased number of keys, resonators and buzzers. Marimba players must regularly check the condition of the buzzers because they are made using plastic, which can burst because of sound, hence they need to be repaired. This becomes difficult and time-consuming with chromatic marimba because of the number of buzzers to be checked on. Besides replacing buzzers, marimba players must service the instruments periodically, tuning and replacing broken keys. With chromatic marimba, this demands more money than the standard set; hence, learning institutions end up opting for the standard marimba sets.

Another challenge with chromatic marimba is that they are not easily movable. This is because of their weight. In some cases, Nattie Junior and Prince Edward school marimba bands travel to other places to perform. For example, some schools perform at the Allied Arts Festival. It is challenging to carry them to places for performances. Peter House School had to dismantle the whole set so as to transport it to Prince Edward School. It is time-consuming to dismantle and then reassemble the chromatic marimba set for performance. Chromatic marimbas are not easy to play. Usually, players cannot coordinate their hands to play the upper part and the lower part. Current learners at Peter House and Nattie Junior are comfortable with playing in C Major and G Major scales. This shows that playing all the chromatic marimba keys is a challenge.



Figure 10: Peter House Chromatic Marimba dismantled (Picture by Masamba, 2024)

Advantages of using chromatic marimbas

One of the advantages of chromatic marimba over the diatonic marimba is that it allows players to choose different keys other than the C Major scale and the G Major scale. Usually, diatonic marimbas are made with two octaves of C Major and then include F sharp to complete the G Major Scale. Using chromatic marimba, players can play a song in the F major scale because all the notes of the scale are available. This gives an advantage in choosing a suitable key for any song. All that is needed is to know different scales. Chromatic marimba can be incorporated into an orchestra band or fused with any other instrument because of its flexibility in keys. With the use of the diatonic marimba, this was limited to only two scales. Other instruments had to be tuned or transposed to suit the marimba keys. With chromatic marimba, players have to know the positions of the keys only. Instruments that can be fused with chromatic marimba are brass instruments, string instruments and even electric instruments such as Keyboards.

Conclusion

Learning institutions in Zimbabwe, including universities, teacher training colleges, polytechnic colleges, and schools offering music programs, predominantly utilise diatonic marimbas. Only one primary and one high school have chromatic marimbas, and these are Peter House and Nattie Junior School. These two are private schools. The marimba construction workshops primarily produce diatonic marimbas, with the option to make chromatic marimbas upon customer order. Most of the marimba tutors are used to diatonic marimbas, hence they opt for what they can teach. Zimbabwean learning institutions do not have a culture of playing instruments as an orchestra; therefore, they do not see any need for chromatic marimba sets. While chromatic marimbas give performers room to play in any key, they are costly and difficult to transport. The research concludes that there is very



low uptake of chromatic marimbas by music schools, colleges and universities in Zimbabwe. The researchers argue that teacher training colleges and universities' curricula should have both the diatonic and chromatic sets to prepare tutors to teach both. Learning institutions should consider incorporating orchestra bands that combine different instruments with marimbas. Chromatic marimba manufacturers in Zimbabwe can promote their product by reducing prices, which will help make it popular in the market.

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