

YORUBA DRUMS, Laoye I, Timi of Ede. "Odu", a journal of Yoruba and related studies, No. 7, March 1959, pp. 5-14.

This short article of some two thousand words describes instruments used among the Yoruba for dancing and making special announcements. Although the title only mentions drums, other percussion instruments are included in the description (a metal bell, a calabash with cowries attached and a pair of iron rings).

Interesting information is given of the way in which these drums are arranged in sets for orchestral purposes — sometimes three, often four and occasionally five and six to a set, though the larger sets include instruments other than drums. The author shows how these instruments have individual names, these often reflecting incidents in the history of the makers. There are twenty-four excellent line drawings to illustrate the text.

Much of the article concerns the use of one or more of the drums in each set for "talking" purposes and especially for beating out the traditional praise-names ("oriki") of important people or tribal heroes. The Western reader will be interested to note that the author regards some of our Christian hymns as being the "oriki" of God (though it is a pity that the hymn, "Immortal, Invisible . . ." is wrongly quoted).

The author, probably writing for a mainly Yoruba public, does not think it necessary to give a detailed explanation of how announcements involving linguistic elements can be made on a membranophone. Essential tonal melodies of speech would seem to be the basis of the drumming, however, because he says that the "dundun" drum is "most suited to talking because it can imitate all the tones and glides used in Yoruba speech". (p. 10). There appear to be two main methods by means of which tonal elements of speech can be reproduced on these instruments:

- (a) by gripping with more or less tension the leather strings at the sides of the hollow drum-cylinder, connecting the two membranes.
- (b) by beating on one membrane while at the same time touching or freeing the second membrane with the other hand.

Non-Yoruba readers would be grateful to the author for a detailed description of the extent to which speech-tones are reproduced by these instruments when announcements are made or "oriki" given. Some of the claims he makes are tantalising in this respect. He says, for instance, that the "*Iya Ilu Bata* (drum), though suited for talking, does so with some difficulty, being a stammerer". (p. 10).

The closing paragraph of the article contains a plea that the tradition of drumming be taught in schools and so preserved for posterity. The author's experience is clearly that of others who are similarly concerned in other parts of the continent where western culture attracts young people and tradition is despised. He will have many well-wishers among readers of this Journal who will hope that representations by nationals to leaders of education in national governments may be successful in interesting school populations in the art-forms of their own countries.

J.F.C.

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YORUBA POETRY. Published by the Ministry of Education, Ibadan, Nigeria.

This book, a special publication of the journal "Black Orpheus", is unusual in almost every respect.

It consists of 68 pages of thick paper, quarto size, folded and stapled like an exercise book, with a chalky blue cover, having on the front a large cubistic picture in black, white and blue. Glancing through the book, one finds eight of these full-page illustrations, printed by the silk-screen process; also ten black-and-white vignettes, and fancy lettering to chapter heads—all by the Austrian artist Susanne Wenger, who has lived among the Yoruba and absorbed their culture. Most Europeans will find these fantastic designs rather incomprehensible, but they are obviously vital, and grow on you as you proceed with a study of the text.

The letterpress consists of traditional Yoruba poems, collected and translated by Bakare Gbadamosi and Ulli Beier, with an excellent introduction, important explanatory comments on each chapter, and 82 textual notes, without which the poems would be even more incomprehensible than the pictures!

The editors explain that much is necessarily lost in translation. Yoruba poetry derives its musical pattern from the tonal structure of the language, which can only be heard, of course, in the original—as can also the alliteration and onomatopoeic devices so richly employed. But on the other hand, the metaphors and similes are here, and the humour, irony, pathos and bathos, on which so much depends.

It is shameful how little most of us know about African poetry, even though we may be familiar with, and appreciate, other African cultural activities. Yet poetry plays an enormous part in the social, religious and personal life of the African. One reason for its difficulty is that it is so intimately bound up with the obscurities of his thought, with roots going down deep into the legendary past. But, for that very reason, we must study it, if we are to gain any understanding of the African soul.

In Europe, poetry is kept in a compartment quite separate from life. It is composed by a few cranks, for a few cranks. 'Normal' people get along without it. But in Africa the situation is very different. In