

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

traditional Yoruba life nothing is done without the help of poetry. The hunter improvises verses about the animal he is tracking. The woman selling cassava in the market chants the praise-names of cassava—rather as the advertisers of commercial radio sing in praise of their tooth paste or stomach powder. People also have praise-names. As you walk through a village, girls sitting outside their huts will sing your praise-names. Chiefs and other important persons acquire a whole string of descriptive phrases referring to their character and deeds and family history, which becomes permanently attached to their names, and are known by heart by all the professional bards and drummers in the locality, who chant them to announce their arrival, say at the palace—and expect to be tipped for doing so. These praise-songs are called ‘*oriki*’. A collection of *oriki* is really a loosely constructed poem, having as its subject a man, a town, or even a god.

The Yoruba poets are intensely interested in the etymology of names—hidden or original meanings, referring back to the legends—though we should think many of them far-fetched and punning. The subtleties of these etymological exercises are lost, of course, on the foreign reader.

The *oriki* about the gods form the most difficult section of the book under review. The references and undertones are quite beyond us. But perhaps it is wholesome to our European pride to have to realise that there are millions of active-minded and intelligent people in the world who can move confidently through whole regions of thought which are utterly outside the limits of our comprehension, so that we just have to stand and gape! Occasionally, however, some short passage will shine out brightly, as being, though paradoxical, at least intelligible.

“Eshu slept in the house—but the house was too small for him.
Eshu slept on the verandah—but the verandah was too small for him.
Eshu slept in a nut—at last he could stretch himself!”

“When the crab leaves its hole
We do not know which direction it is taking,
Shango went to Ibadan and arrived at Ilorin.”

“Lightning, with what kind of cloth do you cover your body?
With the cloth of death.
Shango is the death that drips to, to, to,
Like indigo dye dripping from a cloth.”

References to the gods are not always reverent. Of Shango it is also said:

“His belly is round with hot maize gruel
Like the belly of a pregnant woman.”

These *oriki* of the gods are sung at all the religious ceremonies and festivals. Each cult has its own kind of poetry, with a special technique of recitation.

The famous and influential oracle at Ife employs poetry exclusively. There are said to be 4,696 poems which the priest of the oracle must know by heart. When you seek his advice, he throws a handful of palm nuts, and by the way in which they fall he can tell you which of the poems applies in your particular case, and he recites it to you. It will indicate which of the gods you are to worship, and perhaps what you are to sacrifice e.g., “a mouse, a fish, two hundred bean cakes, and five shillings.”

Poems are used in the masquerade dances, which are devised to establish contact between the worshipper and his deceased ancestors. The dancer wears a mask, and *becomes* the deceased man, even speaking with his voice, and in the poetic form. Other masquerades are just clowning, where the dancers are allowed to ridicule and satirise social conventions and local dignitaries, all in verse.

There is a vast corpus of proverbs, which can be considered as poetry. These are designed to teach the complex system of social etiquette as well as practical wisdom distilled from the experience of the elders of the tribe. Here are some examples:

“Lies travel for twenty years and never arrive.”

“One who wants to drag another man through the bush
Will have to clear the way with his own back.”

“Only the finger that fits the nose
Should be used to clean the nose.”
(i.e. don’t give a servant a job he is not capable of performing.)

Then there are some sly digs at the weakness of human nature:

“If a fowl had a hoe, it would have performed great deeds on the dunghill.”
(i.e. we can always excuse ourselves by saying we lacked the necessary tools.)

“When the Moslem is not hungry he says,
‘We are forbidden to eat monkey’.
When Ibrahim is hungry, he eats a baboon”

“When a hunter meets a buffalo, he will cry out and say,
I only borrowed this gun! I only look after it for a friend!”

"There is no god like one's throat.
We have to sacrifice daily to it!"

The Yoruba does not moralise. He observes and accepts everything, laughing at it. He laughs at everybody, including his gods, and including himself. But there is one 'cautionary tale' in the book under review. A hunter named Ogbe neglected to make the proper sacrifice for his safety before going into the bush. He was caught in a shower of rain, and climbed into a hole for shelter.

"Was it a tree hole? Was it an ant hole? No, it was the anus of an elephant.
The elephant closed his anus—Ogbe prayed but could not escape. His relatives brought the sacrifice. The elephant passed him out with his excreta."

There are riddles, where someone makes a metaphorical statement and his friends round the fire have to guess what he means:

"We call the dead—they answer.
We call the living—they do not answer."
(Meaning: Dead leaves sound when trodden on; green leaves are silent).

"The bereaved one has stopped weeping.
The compassionate friend is still crying."
(Meaning: The rain stops falling, but drops continue to drip from the leaves.)

"Says the yam, 'Lay me on a fine bed, and I will lay you on a fine lady.'
(Meaning: If you plant a yam on a fertile garden bed, it will yield increase and bring you wealth, so that you will be able to afford the brideprice for a fine wife.)

Some amusing metaphorical references to food:

"The poor chicken has many relations. Oil is its relative on the father's side.
Pepper and onions are its relatives on the mother's side. If it does not see its friend Salt even for a day, it will not sleep peacefully".

"Yam, yam, yam, you are of pure white. You have a gown of meat, you have a cap of vegetables, you have trousers of fish."

Yoruba poetry is not often descriptive, but occasionally one lights on a charming miniature picture of village life.

"We dance to our sixteen drums that sound *jingin, jingin, jingin*.
To eight of the drums we dance bending down,
To eight of the drums we dance erect.
We shake our shoulders, we shake our hips.
Munusi, munusi, munusi".

"When the cock crows, the lazy man smacks his lips and he says:
'So it is daylight again, is it?' And before he even turns over heavily, before he stretches himself, before he yawns,
The farmer has reached his farm,
The water carriers have reached the river,
The spinners are spinning their cotton,
The weaver works on his cloth,
The fire is blazing in the blacksmith's hut."

Perhaps life among the Yoruba people is not so remote, strange and incomprehensible, after all!

B.K.