

## STANDARD DRUM PATTERNS IN NIGERIA

by

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In the study of African music, it is often dangerous to draw dogmatic conclusions as what obtains in one part of the continent can many times be entirely different from the practices in other parts; and even in one particular area of research, care must be taken to look at exhaustive data before a general conclusion can be made. In spite of this, I think we can safely say that the drum is the basis of all African instrumental music — and I am not overlooking the all-xylophone orchestras of the Chopi people, who are the exception rather than the rule. I would like to mention here that by *drum* I mean not only the skin variety, but pot drums, wooden drums, calabash drums and all other instruments of this variety which fulfil the same functions.

The bigger a drum is, the more it is able to talk and therefore the more involved its rhythm patterns. These rhythmic patterns become less involved as we come to the smallest drum which is content just to stress the number of beats in the time signature. If the music is in 4/4 time, it taps out four beats to the bar; if in 3/8 time, it plays three beats to the bar. This is the basic procedure; in actual practice, this may be varied and we can have a small drum tapping out the first two beats of every bar and omitting the third in a piece of music, say in 3/8 time; but at no time is anything too involved attempted.

There is also a sociological twist to this. My experience in Nigerian orchestral music is that a group of four drums constitute a complete ensemble; the four drums being made up of father, mother, brother and sister drums representing the four members of an average African family. Where a fifth drum is added, it is usually a two-tone drum to add colour to the inner voices. The most talkative of the group is the mother drum with good reason — a woman (especially when she is excited) can out-talk any man; and here we see the sense of humour of the traditional African musician in allocating drum patterns to the various drums of an ensemble. Two examples will perhaps make this point clearer. The *Bata* group of drums used in the worship of Sango, the god of thunder is made up of *Iya Ilu Bata* (mother drum); *Emele Ako* (male drum); *Emele Abo* (female drum) and *Kudi* (small drum). I have mentioned that a fifth drum (where it occurs) is usually put in to augment the inner voices and strike a balance between a high-pitch drum and a low-pitch one. Sometimes, instead of a fifth drum, a twin gong is brought in to fulfil this function as in the *Abeli* group of drums of the Itsekiri people of Mid-Western Nigeria. The instrumentation here consists of: *Yogume* (mother drum); *Agba* (medium pitch drum); *Otogume* (low pitch drum); *Okere* (high pitch drum) and *Oma* (twin gong).

There are in Nigeria two main types of drum orchestras: those used for ritual worship and those used for festival occasions. Drum orchestras used for ritual or ancestral worship do not, as a rule, make use of gongs as opposed to dance or festival orchestras which have gongs in their instrumentation. The *Abeli* group of drums is a dance orchestra, which probably accounts for the presence of a gong. Here again it is very difficult to draw a hard and fast conclusion. We can only lay down guide lines as to the type of instrumentation generally found in any given situation.

A clear exception to the family of drums we have been discussing is the *Oreyi* group of drums of the Ibos of the East Central State of Nigeria. This orchestra is made up of four talking drums (*Igba*) and one large wooden drum (*Ekwe*). Normally, in a standard drum ensemble the mother drum is the soloist of the group; but here, since the four drums

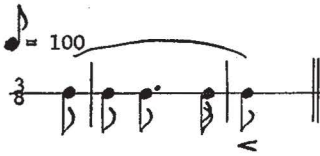
used are of the same variety, a wooden drum is introduced to give a contrasting tone and act as the soloist.

Since we now know that in a standard ensemble there is a talking drum, a low-pitch drum, a medium-pitch drum and a small drum, it is possible to deduce what type of standard rhythm each of these four types of drum produces. Since the talking drum of the group has an improvisatory function, its rhythmic patterns vary with the virtuosity of the performer; and so it is impossible to reproduce what could be regarded as a standard rhythm. It is, however, possible to determine the kind of rhythm that the other drums play in any given situation because their capabilities are limited.

We can broadly divide African drum rhythms into two:

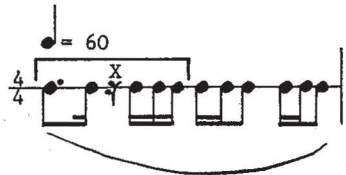
- (a) Rhythms that exist within an all-drum ensemble,
- (b) Rhythms which accompany melodies and melodic fragments.

In Western Nigeria, the majority of drum ensembles are made up of the hour-glass drum variety and a standard drum pattern is detectable in common use by the soloist of the group. I have mentioned that the soloist in a drum group varies his rhythms in accordance with a particular situation, or the melody he happens to be accompanying at a particular time. But in between bursts of improvisation, this rhythmic pattern can be detected:

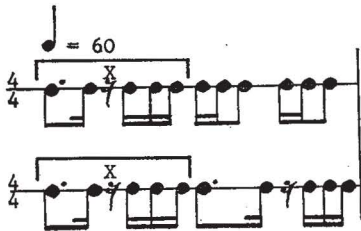


This rhythmic pattern is analogous to a bridge passage in a sonata or an episode in a fugue. The player uses this rhythmic cliché as a sort of rest period to think out what style his next set of improvisations would take. In any ensemble of hour-glass drums in Western Nigeria, the above pattern is invariably heard at one stage or the other during the performance.

Drum rhythms in Northern Nigeria provide a different situation, where drum orchestras are rare; but when they do occur, the instruments used are similar to those of Western Nigeria, sometimes with slight regional modifications. A Festival drum orchestra recorded by the present writer during a Moslem festival at Jos, in Northern Nigeria, used three types of drums: *Kanango*, a high-pitch drum; *Kuntukuru*, a medium-pitch drum; *Kanango*, a small drum with a very piercing sound. The player of the *Kanango* also played the *Dankarikipi* strapped to his leg producing this rhythm:



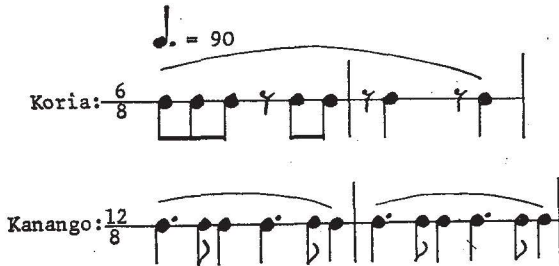
A comparison between this rhythm and that used by the *Ogaji* drum for an accompaniment of a flute orchestra in Makurdi, Northern Nigeria, reveals a common pattern:



This pattern (marked X) is a standard rhythmic drum pattern frequently found in the instrumental music of Northern Nigeria. A rhythm very similar to this is also found in *sakara* music of Western Nigeria where the small drum used for this purpose (shaped like a tambourine) plays this rhythm.



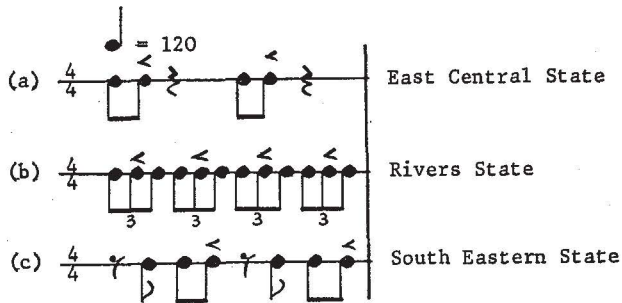
A comparison between the rhythm of the *Koria* (calabash) drum used to accompany the one-string viol in Northern Nigerian and the *Kanango* drum used in Western Nigerian music reveals similar patterns:



For even though one is a skin drum and the other a calabash drum, they are both small drums and the similarity in rhythmic patterns is not unconnected with this fact. Incidentally, the name *Kanango* is used in Western and Northern Nigeria for the same type of drum; but since their functions are different, they produce different rhythms. The *Kanango* rhythm reproduced

above is very different from that used by its Northern Nigeria variety.

A study of drum rhythms in the Eastern States of Nigeria reveals three principal varieties:



It is of course possible to have variants on these standard rhythms but the basic stylistic approach remains the same. In all these examples, there is an accent on the second beat; and where triplets are used, the last beat is a weak one. Triplets are frequently used on two tone drums and only occasionally on other small drums. The last of the drum examples from the South Eastern State is particularly interesting because this rhythm is also used by larger drums in the Efik area of the State. It can be said to be a standard drum rhythm so characteristic of the drumming of the Efik people.