

## THE TALKING DRUMS OF NIGERIA

by

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All the drums found in Nigeria can be broadly grouped under five headings: (1) wooden drum (2) pot drum (3) calabash drum (4) hourglass drum (5) tom-tom drum.<sup>1</sup> Between them, these drum categories span all the ethnic groups in the country. The wooden drum is found only in the Eastern States of Nigeria chiefly among the Ibibios and the Ibos where it is known as *obodom* or *ekwe*.<sup>2</sup> The pot drum is also special to the Ibibios, Ibos and Kalabari of the Eastern States. The calabash or gourd drum is only used by the Hausas of Northern Nigeria where it has specific functions. The hourglass drum is the chief musical instrument of the Yorubas of Western Nigeria; varieties of it can be found among the Hausas. The tom-tom drum which is either large or small is used by the Benis and Itsekiris of the Mid-Western State of Nigeria and extensively by the Ibibios, Ibos and Kalabaris of the Eastern States. It does not exist at all in the Northern States although one or two varieties of it are used by the Yorubas of the West for ritual worship.

The term "talking drum" as it has been used through the years by European musicologists is a complete misnomer. This term conjures in the mind of the uninitiated, Africans with bulging muscles banging away at huge tom-tom drums which are supposed to send messages across large expanses of bush country. This is not strictly correct. It is true that *some* African talking drums were used for this purpose; but it is equally true that there are many *talking drums* that have entirely different functions. The fact is that every African drum *talks* — some more eloquently than others depending on their size, shape and construction. The chief difference between African and European instruments lies in their function and use.<sup>3</sup> Take the trumpet for an instance. The European trumpet with valves can be played by men or women and is used chiefly as an orchestral instrument for large or small groups. The valveless trumpet called *kakaki* in Nigeria is played only by men and has a specific function: heralding the approach or departure of an Emir to or from his palace; for this purpose they use only the first and second harmonics of the instrument and on hearing this played, the community can tell that their chief is either entering or leaving his palace. The European trumpet on the other hand can be played in groups of three or more to produce *absolute* music as opposed to *functional* music. The *use* of the trumpet is different in European and African situations. But perhaps a closer look at the make, characteristics and functions of Nigerian drums will make this discussion more enlightening.

### Wooden drum

The Nigerian wooden drum (known sometimes as slit drum) is in Sach's classification an *idiophone* with the functions of a *membranophone*.<sup>4</sup> It is carved out of a piece from a tree trunk with various sizes producing two tones which are always a

major second, a minor third or a perfect fifth apart. It can be used either singly or in groups of two or three orchestrally. When used singly, it sends out messages from the palace of the chief in a series of rhythmic figures only intelligible to residents in a particular community. These rhythmic figures have been compared to the European Morse code, which they are not. They adhere as much as possible to the rise and fall of speech melody in a musical language which comes easily to the cognoscenti. But perhaps the wooden drum finds its greatest expression in the music of the Ibibio people of the South Eastern State of the country, where it figures prominently in ritualistic and dance orchestras playing a *backbeat* rhythm special to the people of that area:



Two things are happening in this transcription. First there is the rhythm which could be notated like this:



But then that would not be complete because it would not be taking into cognisance the *melodic rhythm* created by playing *two wooden drums* with two different intervals: one a major second and the other a perfect fifth — which is why I have notated the rhythm using five lines instead of one. Ethnomusicologists in the past have tried to notate accurately xylophone and flute music of Africa but have tended to neglect the *tones* of the drums which are selected with care by the musicians and which supply the inner voices in the ensemble in which they are used. Where the tones are as clear as in the wooden drum or the twin-gong, there is no difficulty with the notation; but in other instances where the tones are muffled, then the rise and fall of the drum tones should be indicated and a sign placed under each high or low tone indicating that the pitches are not exact.

### Pot drum

The pot drum or pitcher drum as it is sometimes called is, as its name implies, a large or small pitcher with a hole on the side. Music is produced by the player striking the open end of the pot with the palm of one hand and the hole on the side with the other hand producing two tones which are rhythmical but muffled:



The sign placed over the note produced by the hole on the side of the drum shows that it is indicative of the relative *pitch* but not *tone*. Sometimes the side hole is struck with a flat instrument woven out of raffia instead of the palm of the hand, to produce a more satisfying sound. This drum is an instrument used primarily by women in the Eastern States of Nigeria in groups of two, three or more as accompaniment to their singing. The Ibos call this instrument *Udu* and the Ibibios *Abang*.

### Calabash drum

The word calabash is used commonly in Nigeria to mean gourd. The calabash

drum is a semi-circular gourd struck with two sticks with the open end face downwards. It has only one rather dry tone and is used exclusively by the Hausas of Northern Nigeria to accompany the music of the one-string fiddle called *goge*. An extract from this transcription of a one-string fiddle accompanied by a *Koria* (calabash) drum shows how the drummer picks up and highlights the rhythm in the melody produced by the fiddle. Generally, the accompanist does not know what melody the fiddler will play and picks out his rhythm after listening for a few bars — unless, of course, it is a tune that he has heard before.<sup>5</sup>

It is sometimes possible to have as many as six fiddles playing together accompanied by about two *koria* drums.

### Hourglass drum

This drum is almost a preserve of the Yorubas of Western Nigeria; almost — but not quite because the Hausas of the North also use variants of the drum. As its name implies, it is shaped like an hourglass. For those who do not know what an hourglass is, imagine the picture of a headless woman with measurements of 37-24-37! Its two open ends are covered with membrane with a series of leather strings running from one end of the drum to the other connecting the membranes. In performance, the instrument is slung on one shoulder and supported under the arm. Gradations of tone are produced by hitting one end with a small curved stick and tightening and releasing the leather strings connecting the two drum heads. It can safely be said that the hourglass drum is the most *eloquent* of all Nigerian drums. It has a range of an octave and can produce all quarter tones and semi-tones within that range, although the quarter tones and semi-tones are seldom used by the players as these do not generally occur in the Yoruba language which the drum imitates.

The two most commonly used types of hourglass drum ensembles are the *Bata* orchestra and the *Dundun* orchestra.<sup>6</sup> Between them, these two groups represent a fair cross section of the different types, sizes and makes of the hourglass drum variety. The most eloquent of all the drum orchestras is the *Dundun* group which is most frequently used for festive occasions. The *Bata* orchestra is used for ritual worship. The soloist of all these groups is known under the collective name of *Iya Ilu* (mother drum) and the people generally refer to any kind of hourglass drum as *Gangan*. In any discussion on the Yoruba talking drum, you will always come across the *Gudugudu* (two-tone drum); *Kanango* (high-pitched drum); *Kudi* (dull sounding small drum); *Keri-keri* (low pitched drum); *Isaju* (medium pitched drum). These drums are shaped differently but exist under the umbrella of the hourglass

drum group. In their tone production, they represent the high, medium and low tones of Yoruba speech which they are tuned to represent. Like the wooden drum, which can relay a message when played as a solo instrument, the hourglass drum is employed in the courts of Yoruba chiefs to announce a visitor to the royal household or warn the populace of any impending royal occasion or danger.

### Tom-tom drum

Like the hourglass drum, the tom-tom drum comes in different shapes, sizes and makes. The tom-tom drum is primarily a drum carved out of wood and covered on one end by a membrane. A few are covered on both ends to produce two tones. This drum is found all over Nigeria in one form or the other although it is used extensively in the Eastern and Mid-Western States of Nigeria. The large heavy variety are used almost exclusively for ritual worship and are either played singly or in pairs. Sometimes this common instrumentation is varied as when six *Emoba* drums of the Bini people are played in a very rare ensemble for ritual worship. Among the Ibibios there exists a special drum with three legs called *Nsing Obon* which is used for *Obon* masquerade music and only played when a prominent member of the secret society dies. The three legs of the drum are symbolic of an unusual person, since the ordinary man or woman has only two legs.

Almost all these drums are tuned by little pegs attached to the sides of the drum heads; and the animal skins used as membrane, are specially prepared by the drum makers to make sure that they do not extend or contract upon frequent use. In all-drum ensembles, the largest and lowest sounding of the drums is the one that *talks* most and acts as the soloist. The rhythmic figures played by the other drums in any given ensemble depends on their sizes — the smaller the drum, the less involved its rhythmic figuration. Two types of tom-tom drums frequently encountered are two-tone drums, moderate in size and played (hung around the neck) by both hands and a long, thin drum covered on one end and played by a musician sitting on the drum. Sometimes two of these drums are placed side by side to produce a two-tone effect since the pitches are seldom uniform.

Tom-tom drums are used extensively in dance orchestras where they sometimes combine with wooden drums. This practice is more common among the Ibibios of the South Eastern State; and in this combination, the tom-tom drums used are of the small size variety so as not to obscure the tones of the wooden drum. Very rarely, as in the *Oreyi* orchestra of the Ibos, four large size tom-tom drums are combined with one wooden drum which in this case takes on the role of the soloist.

### Xylophone drum

This discussion will not be complete without a short reference to a type of melodic instrument found among the Ibibios called *Ikon Ikpa*. It consists of very small drums tuned to the pentatonic scale, joined together and played in the same way as a regular xylophone. It is combinations like this which make the study of African music so fascinating and at the same time frustrating when it comes to classification. What does one call this instrument? Drum xylophone or Xylophone drum — the author does not know the answer to this one.

## NOTES

- 1 The word *tom-tom* (for want of a better word) is used to include all skin drums other than the hourglass drum
- 2 The author discovered a wooden drum at the palace of the Alafin of Oyo in Western Nigeria. How this drum got there has not so far been explained.
- 3 Alan Merriam in his *Anthropology of Music* (Northwestern University Press, 1964) makes a clear distinction between function and use in music. pp. 209-227.
- 4 Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1940. pp. 455-467.
- 5 See Samuel Akpabot, "Standard Drum Patterns in Nigeria", *African Music*, Vol. V, no. 1, 1971, pp.37-39.
- 6 Other drum groups are *Igbin*, *Akpente* and *Ikpese* orchestras.

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